

SESSION FIVE

The Bread of the Face

Exodus 25:23-30; Leviticus 24:5-9; 1 Samuel 21:1-6; Leviticus 7:11-15; Psalm 50

PART ONE · LEADER PREPARATION GUIDE

Session Overview

Discovery Aim. Participants walk into Israel's sanctuary and find a golden table with bread perpetually before the LORD, renewed every Sabbath and eaten by priests in the holy place under a covenant for ever. Alongside it they discover the *todah*, the thanksgiving sacrifice completed by a shared meal, and hear Psalm 50 insist that what God wants is not the flesh of bulls but a sacrifice of thanksgiving.

Catholic Touchstone. The Church's oldest name for her central act is Eucharist, from the Greek *eucharistia*, thanksgiving (CCC 1328). Long before that name existed, Israel kept bread continually in God's presence and offered a sacrifice whose very name meant thanks and whose completion was a meal. Tonight the group learns the vocabulary God spent centuries teaching.

What You Need to Know

Tonight has two movements: the bread of the Presence in the sanctuary, and the *todah* sacrifice with Psalm 50 as its theology. They converge on one discovery: at the heart of Israel's worship, God installed a table, and Israel's most joyful sacrifice was one you ate.

Exodus 25 is God furnishing his own house. Among the first pieces of furniture he commands, before the lampstand and right after the ark itself, is a table of acacia wood overlaid with pure gold (Exodus 25:23-30). Read verse 29 closely with the group: the table's service includes plates and dishes for incense, but also flagons and bowls "with which to pour libations." Drink offerings. Bread on the table and vessels for wine beside it, in the holy place, feet from the ark. Do not connect this to anything tonight. Let the furniture speak.

The bread is called *lechem happanim*, literally "bread of the face," traditionally rendered bread of the Presence or showbread. The name is the theology: this bread sits before the face of God, continually (Exodus 25:30). Israel's God does not need food, and her own Scriptures say so out loud; Psalm 50 will do it tonight. So the bread is not God's dinner. It is something stranger and better, and Scripture never explains it directly. The rite speaks by gesture, and you should be honest with the group that we are reading a gesture.

Leviticus 24:5-9 gives the rite: twelve loaves, set in two rows on the pure gold table, with frankincense on each row as a memorial portion offered by fire. Every Sabbath, fresh loaves, "on behalf of the sons of Israel as a covenant for ever." And the old loaves do not go in the trash: Aaron and his sons shall eat them in a holy place, as a most holy portion, a perpetual due. Twelve loaves for twelve tribes: all Israel,

represented as bread, standing perpetually before the face of God, and then eaten by priests inside God's own house. There is a communion meal at the heart of the sanctuary, every week, for ever.

The David episode (1 Samuel 21:1-6) puts the showbread into a story. David, anointed king but hunted by Saul, arrives at the sanctuary at Nob, hungry, with companions. The priest Ahimelech has no common bread, only the bread of the Presence just rotated off the table, and he gives it: the anointed but not yet enthroned king receives the holy bread as provision for himself and his men. Present it as exactly that and no more. Where this story gets retold, and by whom, belongs to a later week.

The *todah* (Leviticus 7:11-15) is the thanksgiving form of the peace offering: brought not for sin but for gratitude, typically after a deliverance, and it stands out in its menu and its clock: it comes with bread, including leavened loaves found nowhere else at the altar (Leviticus 7:13), and unlike the other peace offerings, which may be eaten over two days (Leviticus 7:16), its flesh must be eaten the day it is offered. The same-day rule makes a shared meal the natural shape of the *todah*: a whole animal plus loaves is more than one household eats before morning. Israel's practice bore this out: Psalm 107:22 pairs the thanksgiving sacrifice with telling of God's deeds, and Psalm 22:25-26 pictures the delivered one paying vows while the poor eat and are satisfied. Present the feast, the guests, and the storytelling as the sacrifice's lived shape attested in the Psalms, not as clauses of Leviticus 7.

Psalm 50 is the *todah*'s theology in God's own voice. He does not reprove Israel's sacrifices (50:8) but demolishes any magical reading of them: if I were hungry, I would not tell you; shall I eat the flesh of bulls? (50:12-13). What he asks instead: "Offer to God a sacrifice of thanksgiving" (50:14), and the psalm's last word on worship: "He who brings thanksgiving as his sacrifice honors me" (50:23). God wants the sacrifice you eat in gratitude, not the one you imagine feeds him.

Vocabulary note worth having ready: the Greek translators of Israel's Scriptures rendered the *todah* as *thysia aineseōs*, "sacrifice of praise" (a phrase Hebrews 13:15 will echo), and the Church from the beginning has called her central act Eucharist, from the Greek *eucharistia*, thanksgiving (CCC 1328). The inheritance is the concept: a sacrifice whose very name is gratitude, completed as a meal. State it as vocabulary, not as an argument; the argument builds itself over the coming weeks.

Old Testament Roots and Fulfillment

The bread of the Presence completes a quiet triangle this study has been drawing: bread from heaven fed Israel in the wilderness (Session Four), an omer of it was sealed before the Testimony (Exodus 16:33-34), and now bread stands permanently before the LORD's face in the sanctuary that houses that Testimony. Wilderness gift has become standing furniture. God keeps bread in his house.

Thread B is humming tonight without needing a word from you: priests, bread, wine vessels, a holy place, a covenant for ever. Melchizedek's silhouette is visible in the sanctuary's floor plan. If someone says so, smile and agree that the furniture looks familiar, and move on.

The *todah* tradition has a remarkable afterlife. Psalm 116, one of the psalms Israel sang at Passover, speaks the *todah*'s logic: "I will lift up the cup of salvation and call on the name of the LORD... I will offer to you the sacrifice of thanksgiving" (Psalm 116:13, 17). Hold Psalm 116 entirely; it is loaded for a later session. And an ancient rabbinic tradition preserved in *Leviticus Rabbah* says that in the age to come all

sacrifices will cease except the *todah*, which will never cease. That tradition sits in tonight's Dig Deeper, clearly labeled as rabbinic tradition rather than Scripture.

Voices of the Church

St. Bede the Venerable

On the Tabernacle, 8th century

St. Bede, writing a book-length meditation on Israel's sanctuary, lingered over the golden table and its loaves. He read the bread kept perpetually before the Lord as a figure of the unfailing nourishment God provides his people, and in the twelve loaves he saw the whole people of God, no tribe missing, standing represented in God's presence as bread.

St. Augustine of Hippo

The City of God, Book 10

St. Augustine taught that God has no need of anything we offer; the sacrifice God seeks is the one that unites the offerer to him. True sacrifice, he wrote, is every work done in order to cling to God in holy fellowship. The animal on the altar was always a sign; the reality is the offerer himself given to God, the contrite heart, the work of mercy, and the whole redeemed city made one body in the offering (City of God 10.5-6).

St. Cyril of Jerusalem

Mystagogical Catecheses, 4th century

St. Cyril, walking the newly baptized through the Church's worship, paused over its opening dialogue: lift up your hearts, let us give thanks to the Lord. Truly we are bound to give thanks, he taught, for God called us, unworthy as we were, to so great a grace, making us his friends when we were his enemies (Mystagogical Catecheses 5, on the Eucharistic dialogue).

Catechism Connection

- **CCC 1328.** The inexhaustible richness of the sacrament is expressed in its names: it is called Eucharist because it is an action of thanksgiving to God, recalling the Jewish blessings that proclaim God's works of creation, redemption, and sanctification.
- **CCC 1334.** In the Old Covenant bread and wine were offered in sacrifice among the first fruits of the earth as a sign of grateful acknowledgment to the Creator, and Israel's bread traditions carried the memory of God's saving deeds.

Thread Watch

THREAD WATCH · LEADER ONLY

Thread B reinforced heavily tonight, in silence. Bread on a golden table, wine vessels beside it, priests eating in a holy place, a covenant for ever. The group may hear Melchizedek's footsteps or

think of words they hear on Sundays. Confirm that their ears work, and hold the line: we will let the story assemble itself.

Guard the David retelling. Jesus cites the showbread episode (Matthew 12:3-4). That retelling, and everything it implies about who gives holy bread to whom, belongs to the Gospels. Tonight David's story is presented as Old Testament narrative, full stop.

Guard Psalm 116. The cup of salvation and the *todah* vow are loaded for the Last Supper session. Do not open Psalm 116 with the group tonight.

The "for ever" motif is accumulating: a memorial for ever (Exodus 12), a testimony kept for ever (Exodus 16), a covenant for ever (Leviticus 24), a priest for ever (Psalm 110). Do not point at the pile. Keep stacking.

Session Goals

1. Discover the table of the bread of the Presence: what stands on it, where it stands, and how strange it is that God's house has a table at all.
2. See the rite of Leviticus 24: twelve loaves for all Israel, renewed every Sabbath, eaten by priests in the holy place, a covenant for ever.
3. Meet the *todah*: the thanksgiving sacrifice that is completed as a shared meal, and hear Psalm 50 name thanksgiving as the sacrifice God actually wants.
4. Leave with the converging picture: at the center of Israel's worship stands a table, and the sacrifice of the grateful is eaten.

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: Cut the 1 Samuel 21 question and let the David episode wait; it will be retold later in the study regardless. Treat cuts as emergencies, not expectations; at this length the session should breathe on its own.

AT THE TABLE

Twelve small rolls tonight, set out in two neat rows of six. Say absolutely nothing about the arrangement. Someone will notice mid-session, and that moment belongs to them.

PART TWO · DISCUSSION GUIDE

Opening Prayer · Grace Before the Meal

Lord God, you set a table in your own house and kept bread before your face for ever. Bless this table and this bread, receive our thanks as the sacrifice you love, and keep us in your presence. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

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

1. Is there a table in your life, past or present, where you always know you have a place? What makes it feel that way?
2. When something great happens to you, who do you want at the celebration dinner, and what do you serve?

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 Exodus 25:23-30. God is furnishing his own dwelling. What piece of furniture is he commanding here, what is it made of, and what is to be on it always?

ANSWER · SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

A table: acacia wood overlaid with pure gold, with a gold molding, rings, and poles so it travels with the sanctuary. And the standing order of verse 30: "And you shall set the bread of the Presence on the table before me always."

Sit with the plain strangeness first. Of all the furniture the God of Israel commands for his house, one of the first pieces is a table with bread on it, permanently. God's house has a table. Whatever else tonight teaches, do not lose that sentence.

2. Look closely at Exodus 25:29. Besides plates and dishes, what vessels belong to this table's service, and for what?

ANSWER · SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

Flagons and bowls "with which to pour libations." Drink offerings. The golden table is equipped for bread and for wine, together, in the holy place.

The text offers no commentary, and neither will we tonight. But notice what now stands a few feet from the ark of the covenant: bread before God's face, and vessels for wine beside it. File the furniture.

3. The bread has a name: in Hebrew, *lechem happanim*, literally "bread of the face." What does that name suggest this bread is for? And what is it clearly not for, given what Israel knew about her God?

ANSWER · SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

The name locates the bread: before the face, in the Presence. This bread exists to stand where God is, continually. Israel's Scriptures insist her God does not eat; the pagan temples around her fed their idols daily, and Psalm 50 will mock the very idea tonight. So this cannot be God's dinner.

Scripture never explains the showbread directly, so hold interpretations with open hands. But the gesture reads: something of Israel stands perpetually in God's presence, in the form of bread. The question of what God intends to do with bread in his presence is left hanging, on purpose, for centuries.

4. Read Leviticus 24:5-9, the full rite. How many loaves, arranged how, refreshed when? And, most important, what happens to the loaves that come off the table?

ANSWER · SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

Twelve loaves, two rows of six, frankincense on each row as a memorial portion, renewed every Sabbath, "on behalf of the sons of Israel as a covenant for ever." Twelve loaves for twelve tribes: all Israel, represented as bread before the face of God, no tribe missing.

And the retired loaves are not discarded. Aaron and his sons eat them in a holy place, as a most holy thing, a perpetual due. Weigh that: the bread that represents Israel stands before God, and then priests eat it inside God's own house. At the very heart of Israel's sanctuary there is a communion meal, every week, under a covenant for ever.

5. Live discovery: this bread steps into a famous story. Find 1 Samuel 21:1-6. Who asks for the bread of the Presence, in what circumstances, and what does the priest decide?

Give them time to find it and reconstruct the scene: David anointed but hunted, the sanctuary at Nob, no common bread in the house.

ANSWER · SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

David, already anointed king but on the run from Saul, arrives hungry with his men at the sanctuary of Nob. The priest Ahimelech has only the holy bread, the bread of the Presence just rotated off the table, and he gives it to David. David has asked for bread for himself and the young men he says await him (21:2-5), so the text presents this as provision for the anointed one and his men, though it narrates only the giving.

Hold the picture exactly as the text gives it: the anointed but not yet enthroned king, hunted by the powers of the present order, receives the bread of God's presence from a priest's hands for himself and his companions. Israel told this story for a thousand years. So will we, but not tonight.

6. Now the second movement of the night. Read Leviticus 7:11-15, the thanksgiving form of the peace offering, in Hebrew the *todah*. What comes with this sacrifice, and what is the rule about when it must be eaten? What does that rule force you to do?

ANSWER · SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

The *todah* is offered not for sin but for thanksgiving, and it comes with bread: cakes and wafers and loaves alongside the sacrifice. And its flesh "shall be eaten on the day of his offering; he shall not leave any of it until the morning."

A same-day rule for that much food points toward a feast: it is hard to eat a *todah* alone. Israel's practice paired this sacrifice with invited guests and the telling of God's deeds (see Psalm 107:22), so the *todah* in practice became a shared meal of gratitude. Israel's happiest offering is one you eat together.

7. Live discovery: Psalm 50 is God's own commentary on sacrifice. Find and read Psalm 50:8-15, then verse 23. What does God say he does not need, and what does he ask for instead?

Let the humor of verses 12 and 13 land; the psalm is being deliberately sharp.

ANSWER · SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

God does not reprove the sacrifices themselves, but he dismantles any idea that they feed him: every beast of the forest is already his; "If I were hungry, I would not tell you"; shall I eat the flesh of bulls or drink the blood of goats? The pagan picture of feeding the deity is being openly mocked.

What he asks instead: "Offer to God a sacrifice of thanksgiving, and pay your vows to the Most High," and the psalm's closing verdict, "He who brings thanksgiving as his sacrifice honors me." The sacrifice God wants is the *todah*: gratitude, spoken and shared at a table. Vocabulary worth keeping: Israel's happiest sacrifice was named thanksgiving, and thanksgiving, eucharistia in Greek, is the name the Church has given her central act from the beginning. Keep the word.

DIG DEEPER

An ancient rabbinic tradition, preserved in Leviticus Rabbah, looks at the end of history and makes a striking claim: in the age to come, all sacrifices will cease, but the *todah*, the thanksgiving sacrifice, will never cease; thanksgiving will endure for ever. That is not Scripture, and we cite it as what it is, the voice of Israel's later teachers. But mark what Israel's own tradition intuited: when everything else has served its purpose, what remains is thanksgiving, and thanksgiving is a meal.

8. Assemble the night. In the holiest space Israel has: a golden table, bread before God's face, wine vessels beside it, priests eating in the Presence under a covenant for ever. In Israel's happiest worship: a thanksgiving sacrifice completed by a shared meal. What is God teaching Israel to expect from him?

ANSWER · SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

Hold it with appropriate humility, because Israel herself did not have the full picture, and neither, yet, do we. But the shape of the teaching is hard to miss: God keeps a table. Communion with him has bread at the center of it, gratitude as its grammar, and eating as its completion.

Everything Israel's worship rehearses, a table in the Presence, priests who eat the holy bread, thanksgiving that culminates in a feast, is rehearsal for something. The prophets, next week, will tell Israel what.

Send · Taking It With You (15 minutes)

- 1.** Psalm 50 says the one who brings thanksgiving honors God. What deliverance in your own life have you never actually thrown the feast for? What would it look like to throw it?
- 2.** The showbread means something of Israel stood before God's face continually. If something of you stands before God right now, what is it, and what do you want it to be?

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

Live It This Week

- 1.** Keep a running thanksgiving list this week: one deliverance or gift written down each day. On the last day, read the list aloud to God as your *today*.
- 2.** Host or organize one deliberately grateful meal this week, even a small one, where at some point you say out loud what you are thankful for and why. Invite someone who was not at the last one.
- 3.** Pray Psalm 50 once this week, slowly, and let verses 12 to 15 recalibrate what you think God wants from you.

Scripture Memory Verse

"Offer to God a sacrifice of thanksgiving, and pay your vows to the Most High."

Psalm 50:14

Closing Prayer

Father, you need nothing and you give everything. Receive our thanks as the sacrifice you love, keep something of us always before your face, and teach us to celebrate our deliverances at your table. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

PART THREE · LEADER REFERENCE CARD

Passages in order of use

- Exodus 25:23-30 · the golden table commanded; bread before me always
- Exodus 25:29 · flagons and bowls for libations
- Leviticus 24:5-9 · twelve loaves, every Sabbath, eaten by priests, a covenant for ever
- 1 Samuel 21:1-6 · live discovery: David eats the bread of the Presence
- Leviticus 7:11-15 · the todah: thanksgiving completed by a meal
- Psalm 50:8-15, 23 · live discovery: the sacrifice of thanksgiving
- Psalm 50:14 · memory verse

Leader only · do not distribute or read aloud

- Exodus 16:33-34 · the omer before the Testimony (connects last week to this)
- Numbers 4:7 · the table carried with the bread still on it (background)
- Matthew 12:3-4 · Jesus retells the David episode (hold for the Gospels)
- Psalm 116:13, 17 · the cup of salvation; todah vocabulary (hold for Session Ten)
- Leviticus Rabbah 9:7 · rabbinic tradition on the todah never ceasing (Dig Deeper; cite as tradition, not Scripture)
- CCC 1379 · the tabernacle of reservation (background; hold entirely)