

The Meals of Scripture

Reimagining how we eat, who gets to eat, and what it all means



a 4-week study
by Rev. Wesley Spears-Newsome

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Introduction

One of the most universal human experiences is gathering to eat together. With that in mind, it seems logical that the Bible talks a lot about food. From the food laws in the Torah to the Last Supper in the Gospels, the Scriptures are saturated with mentions, imagines, and practices of eating. Yet, in our world we don't often reflect on eating – certainly not eating together.

What would it look like to reimagine the ways in which we ate together? What if every act of eating together was a recognition of where we've been, our relationship with creation, our connections with each other, or anticipation of our ultimate heavenly banquet with God? Would that change the way we eat?

This four-week study aims to explore some of those questions while examining the meals of Scripture and meals associated with the Judeo-Christian traditions. We'll begin with the Passover meal and what sacred meals look like, symbolize, and mean for us today. Then, we'll look at Sabbath and the Shabbat meals that emerged in the Jewish traditions. We will then move into the most significant meal of the Christian tradition, the Last Supper, and the communion, Eucharist, or Lord's Supper tradition that came from it. As Paul did in his first letter to the Corinthians, we will in this discussion specifically consider issues of food justice. Finally, we will consider the heavenly banquet alluded to in the New Testament and what it means for our hope and even how we eat today.

In each session (timed for 45 minutes), we will reflect on how we already eat (together and separately), revisit a biblical meal and reflect on it, reinterpret the biblical meal for our current situation, and respond with ways that we could see our lives changing in light of what we discuss.

Each week, we will utilize and reflect on the following Shabbat table prayer.

Blessed are you, Lord our God, Sovereign of the world, who provides food for the entire world in your goodness, with grace, kindness and mercy. You supply bread for all living beings, for your kindness is everlasting. Because of your great goodness, we have never lacked food, nor will we ever lack it on account of your great name. For you are a God who nourishes and sustains all, and is good to all,

and who supplies good for all your creatures which you have created. Blessed are you, God, who provides food for all. *

Each week, the prayer will take on a different tone according to the week's topic. The final week, we will develop our own table blessing.



*Adapted from: <http://image.aish.com/misc/grace.pdf>

Session 1: Memory, Passover, and the Sacred Meal

We will open each session with this Shabbat Table Prayer cited in the Introduction. As the leader, you may read this prayer, have a participant lead the prayer, or break it up into parts so that more may participate. The latter two options are preferred. Be sure to refer to its origins each week. The prayer:

Blessed are you, Lord our God, Sovereign of the world, who provides food for the entire world in your goodness, with grace, kindness and mercy. You supply bread for all living beings, for your kindness is everlasting. Because of your great goodness, we have never lacked food, nor will we ever lack it on account of your great name. For you are a God who nourishes and sustains all, and is good to all, and who supplies good for all your creatures which you have created. Blessed are you, God, who provides food for all.

Amen.

Materials:

- Pens/Pencils
- Sacred Meal Handouts (see end of this section)
- Matza (unleavened bread)

Goals:

- To reflect on our sacred meal practices and those of ancient Israel
- To practice consciously developing a sacred meal

Memory (10 minutes)

Begin by reflecting with your group on the following questions:

- 1.) What meals are most important to you and/or your family? What daily meals? What special occasion meals?
- 2.) What meals do you remember most from the rest of your life? Which ones stand out? Think about repeated meals (e.g., Thanksgiving, Christmas dinner) or unique ones (e.g., a wedding reception).
- 3.) What about these meals makes them special or even sacred? Is it the food that you eat? Is it the time of day or year? Is it a specific event?

As the leader, notice what stands out. Look out for things like this:

- “Every Christmas breakfast we have the same meal at my house that my parents have at theirs even though they live hundreds of miles away.”

- “We eat a special kind of turkey every Thanksgiving in memory of my mother. It’s what she used to cook.”
- “I remember the meal at my brother’s wedding reception. It was the last time I remember the whole family eating together.”
- “When I was a kid, my parents made sure we ate every dinner together at night at the dinner table with no interruptions. It was a set-apart time for just us.”

Each of these get at the ways memory is important in how we eat. The practices we embody in how we eat, how often we eat certain things, and even what certain things we eat are governed by memory. We honor memory with food and pay homage to valued parts of our lives. We invest a sacredness to food, particularly in moments like holiday meals.

That is a tradition that is much older than any of us. Indeed, the ancient Israelites received explicit instructions to do so after the Exodus from Egypt.

Passover (15 minutes)

Recall the story of the Israelites prior to the Exodus together. They had first arrived in Egypt during a time of famine when Joseph, son of Jacob (Israel), was in a position of power. Years after Joseph’s death, the Israelites still found themselves in Egypt, but no longer with one of their own in a privileged position. Instead, when “a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph,” the Israelites became slaves (Exodus 1:8, NRSV). The rulers of Egypt used punitive measures to keep the Hebrew people in line, including a massacre of Hebrew boys at birth (1:15-16). Moses famously escaped death as a baby, saved by midwives, floated down a river, and adopted by the royal family (2:1-10).

Moses, outcast from Egypt for his role in the killing of an Egyptian, fled to a foreign land where he worked with livestock and got married (2:11-25). God called Moses to lead God’s people out of Egypt, but Pharaoh and the Egyptians were resistant (Exodus 3-11). When the Israelites planned their dramatic escape from Egypt, God sent an angel of death to kill the firstborn of their Egyptian captors (Exodus 11). The Israelites were to mark their doorways with lambs’ blood so the angel would not harm them, and God assured them that they would be led to freedom.

This event, known as Passover, became a pivotal event in Israel’s history. The Passover is a major celebration each year even in modern Judaism. Exodus tells us that the Passover was instituted to remember their captivity in Egypt and their hasty escape.

Read together the text of the institution of the Passover meals:

Remember this day on which you came out of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, because the Lord brought you out from there by strength of hand; no leavened bread shall be eaten.

Today, in the month of Abib, you are going out. When the Lord brings you into the land of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites, which he swore to your ancestors to give you, a land flowing with milk and honey, you shall keep this observance in this month.

For seven days you shall eat unleavened bread, and on the seventh day there shall be a festival to the Lord. Unleavened bread shall be eaten for seven days; no leavened bread shall be seen in your possession, and no leaven shall be seen among you in all your territory.

You shall tell your child on that day, “It is because of what the Lord did for me when I came out of Egypt.”

It shall serve for you as a sign on your hand and as a reminder on your forehead, so that the teaching of the Lord may be on your lips; for with a strong hand the Lord brought you out of Egypt. You shall keep this ordinance at its proper time from year to year.

Exodus 13:3-10, NRSV

If you are able to purchase some matza (unleavened bread) from the kosher market or make it yourself, bring it to the Bible study and serve it at this point. Explain that while not precisely what the Israelites were eating, this is an approximation of what it would have been like.

Wonder together about the following questions:

- Why was this meal sacred to the Israelites?
- Why did they use this unleavened bread? What does eating it show you about this experience? What stands out?
- How does this meal help the Israelites remember the Exodus? Why is that important?

- What is similar and different about the Israelites' sacred meal and ours that we discussed earlier?

The Sacred Meal (20 minutes)

Now that we have reflected on our practices of sacred meals and the Israelites practice of Passover, let's consider our own practices again. In light of what you have discussed in the previous sections, talk about ...

- How might we learn from the Israelites about how to make our own meals?
- How could our special/sacred meals help us remember? How could we incorporate memory into our special/sacred meals?

Pass out the worksheet on the next page. Have participants develop an outline of a sacred meal they could participate in with their families or friends. The worksheets are individual, but they should feel free to work together where appropriate.

When they have completed their worksheets or you are nearing the end of your time, have them share about their experience and planned meal with each other. See what themes they have in common, what priorities they have, and what kinds of events they wanted to host. Explore whether or not your church could participate in any of these events as a gathered community.

Conclude with the Jewish table prayer:

Blessed are you, Lord our God, Sovereign of the world, who provides food for the entire world in your goodness, with grace, kindness and mercy. You supply bread for all living beings, for your kindness is everlasting. Because of your great goodness, we have never lacked food, nor will we ever lack it on account of your great name. For you are a God who nourishes and sustains all, and is good to all, and who supplies good for all your creatures which you have created. Blessed are you, God, who provides food for all.

Amen.



Developing a Sacred Meal

What event do you want to commemorate? _____

Examples: *a family event, a shared social event, or even a biblical event*

What do you want to remember about God in this meal? _____

Examples: *God provides for us, the Spirit inspires us, or Christ will come again*

What do you want to say about each other in this meal? _____

Examples: *We want to remember a specific family member, we want to recognize our community and what it means to us, or we want to celebrate the way God has made each one of us*

What sort of meal would communicate what you want to say about God and each other at this meal?

What would you eat? _____

How would you eat it? _____

Where? _____

Who makes it? _____

When do you eat it? _____

What other activities surrounding the meal could help you remember what the meal means to you?

Examples: *singing spiritual songs, praying specific prayers, or telling stories*

Developing a Sacred Meal (Example)

What event do you want to commemorate? *Christmas Eve Dinner*

What do you want to remember about God in this meal? *That God came to us as a stranger seeking shelter*

What do you want to say about each other in this meal? *We should recognize God in the strangers of our world, because that's how God came to us*

What sort of meal would communicate what you want to say about God and each other at this meal?

A meal after we went from house to house seeking shelter to commemorate Joseph and Mary's search

What would you eat? *A big meal at the final home*

How would you eat it? *By inviting each other to our homes*

Where? *Each other's homes*

Who makes it? *Church members*

When do you eat it? *At night as we moved from house to house*

What other activities surrounding the meal could help you remember what the meal means to you?

*We could read a different part of the Christmas story and sing a different hymn at every house on our journey, but we would not enjoy a meal together until the final stop, remembering that Mary and Joseph were repeatedly turned away before someone provided for them.**

*This practice is loosely based on the *posada* practiced in Hispanic and Latino/a communities. See Ana María Pineda, "Hospitality" in *Practicing our Faith*, ed. Dorothy C. Bass (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2010).

Session 2: Rest, Shabbat, and Work

We will open each session with this Shabbat Table Prayer cited in the Introduction. As the leader, you may read this prayer, have a participant lead the prayer, or break it up into parts so that more may participate. The latter two options are preferred. Be sure to refer to its origins each week. The prayer:

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Amen.

Materials:

- Challah Bread
- Two Candles
- Lighter/Matches

Goals:

- To reflect on our own view and prioritization of rest
- To evaluate that view in light of the biblical witness
- To practice reorienting ourselves to value rest and work appropriately

Rest (15 minutes)

This week, we will be talking about rest. What are our patterns for rest? Do we get enough rest? Why is rest important?

God found that rest was important enough to command it in the Old Testament. God apparently also knew that we would ignore divine advice for rest, because it is a repeated command and observance throughout the Bible. Yet, in our rushed and harried world, we still do not rest. Reflect together:

1. When do you take time to rest? Do you? Why or why not?
2. What have you been taught about rest? Is rest the opposite of ambition? Is rest a lack of activity? Is rest merely sleep or something more?
3. What do you know about how the Bible talks about rest?

Sabbath (15 minutes)

Recount together what the Bible says about Sabbath rest. As the leader, know:

It begins in the creation stories of Genesis, where God rests on the seventh day of creation (2:2-3). It is one of the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:8-11, Deuteronomy 5:12-15). It was taken so seriously in the Torah, the first five books of the Old Testament, that Sabbath-breakers were supposed to be cut off from Israel (Exodus 31:12-17). There was even a “Sabbath of Sabbaths,” known still today as Yom Kippur (Leviticus 16:31). Every seven years, the land was supposed to rest just as the people rested every seventh day (Leviticus 25:3-6). Even the people to whom Jesus ministered were obsessed with keeping the Sabbath correctly, so Jesus had to talk a lot about it (e.g., Matthew 12:1-8, 9-14; Mark 2:23-28).

To explore Sabbath more deeply, let’s look together at another one of the Israelites’ experiences during the Exodus. First, introduce the text. The Israelites have been wandering in the desert for a while since we left them last week. They have begun to complain about the lack of resources and shelter. While God, Moses, and Aaron do not look kindly on remarks that the Israelites may have been better off in Egypt, God does pledge to provide for them in both meat and bread in the desert. Now, read (or have a participant read) Exodus 16:13-16.

In the evening quails came up and covered the camp; and in the morning there was a layer of dew around the camp. When the layer of dew lifted, there on the surface of the wilderness was a fine flaky substance, as fine as frost on the ground.

When the Israelites saw it, they said to one another, “What is it?” For they did not know what it was.

Moses said to them, “It is the bread that the Lord has given you to eat. This is what the Lord has commanded: ‘Gather as much of it as each of you needs, an omer to a person according to the number of persons, all providing for those in their own tents.’”

The Israelites did so, some gathering more, some less. But when they measured it with an omer, those who gathered much had nothing over, and those who gathered little had no shortage; they gathered as much as each of them needed.

And Moses said to them, “Let no one leave any of it over until morning.” But they did not listen to Moses; some left part of it until morning, and it bred worms and became foul. And Moses was angry with them. Morning by morning they gathered it, as much as each needed; but when the sun grew hot, it melted.

On the sixth day they gathered twice as much food, two omers apiece. When all the leaders of the congregation came and told Moses, he said to them, “This is what the Lord has commanded: ‘Tomorrow is a day of solemn rest, a holy sabbath to the Lord; bake what you want to bake and boil what you want to boil, and all that is left over put aside to be kept until morning.’”

So they put it aside until morning, as Moses commanded them; and it did not become foul, and there were no worms in it. Moses said, “Eat it today, for today is a sabbath to the Lord; today you will not find it in the field. For six days you shall gather it; but on the seventh day, which is a sabbath, there will be none.”

Consider the following discussion questions together.

- Why would God make them rest on the seventh day?
- What is the connection between the Sabbath Day and our relationship with God?
- What is the connection between food and rest?

In this discussion, you will likely arrive at a conversation about Sabbath and trust. God’s command to the Israelites in this passage had a lot to do with trust in God’s provision. Resting on the seventh day instead of pursuing the means of production and results requires a profound trust in God. Do we have that kind of trust?

Recognizing Work and Rest (15 minutes)

Sabbath is kept in many modern Jewish circles in the recognition of Shabbat. Many observe Shabbat from a few minutes before sundown on Friday until sometime on Saturday night. You greet the Sabbath with preparation on Friday (everything from a haircut to housecleaning) and a service of prayer and eating. Another ritual meal happens at Saturday lunch, and a final meal bids farewell to the Sabbath and ushers in the new week on Saturday night. One of the most common foods at a Shabbat

meal is challah, this braided bread. You usually have two loaves, which represent the double portion of manna we just read about.

As it is Sunday, and not Sabbath, we won't reenact a Sabbath ceremony here. But to close us out of our Bible Study time, we will do a short prayer exercise that invites us to find rest in the coming week. As is common in a lot of Jewish prayer and ritual ceremonies, distribute parts of the prayers to participants which they can read at the instructed time. See the service below:

(A page where you can cut out the participants' lines follows the lesson.)

Lighting the Candles

The leader should light the candles.

Leader: We light these candles in recognition of all the work we have done. We ask for God's blessing on our work.

Participant #1: Lord our God, we thank you and bless you for everything that you have given us. Thank you for the energy we have expended in our work this week. Thank you for the results that we have seen of our labor. Thank you for the payment we receive for our work.

Participant #2: We pause and pray for those of us who do not have the energy to work, for those of us who do not see the results of our labor, for those of us who do not receive enough payment for our work.

Leader: Pray to thank God and ask for just treatment of work.

The Enjoyment of Bread

After a prayerful pause, the leader should extinguish the candles.

Leader: We extinguish the candles of our work to recognize when we should not work. We take this bread and eat in memory of manna, knowing that God provides. Take, and eat.

The leader may pass the challah loaves around the table for eating.

Participant #3: Lord our God, we thank you for food. Thank you for providing for us, and granting us sustenance to give us energy to do our work. Thank you for filling our stomachs and granting us rest.

Participant #4: We pause and pray for those who do not have enough food to regain their energy for work. We pray for those whose stomachs are not filled or those who cannot work to receive their fill. We also pray for those who cannot rest from their work.

Leader: Pray to thank God for our rest and our food. But let's also pray for those who may lack rest or food.

The Re-Lighting of Candles

After prayerful silence, the leader should relight the candles.

Leader: We relight these candles in recognition of a new week that requires new energy, new results, and new work. Be with us, Lord God, in our working this week and grant us rest at its end.

Participant #5: Blessed are you, Lord our God, Sovereign of the world, who provides food for the entire world in your goodness, with grace, kindness and mercy. You supply bread for all living beings, for your kindness is everlasting. Because of your great goodness, we have never lacked food, nor will we ever lack it on account of your great name. For you are a God who nourishes and sustains all, and is good to all, and who supplies good for all your creatures which you have created. Blessed are you, God, who provides food for all.

Amen.



#1:

Lord our God, we thank you and bless you for everything that you have given us. Thank you for the energy we have expended in our work this week. Thank you for the results that we have seen of our labor. Thank you for the payment we receive for our work.

#2:

We pause and pray for those of us who do not have the energy to work, for those of us who do not see the results of our labor, for those of us who do not receive enough payment for our work.

#3:

Lord our God, we thank you for food. Thank you for providing for us, and granting us sustenance to give us energy to do our work. Thank you for filling our stomachs and granting us rest.

#4:

We pause and pray for those who do not have enough food to regain their energy for work. We pray for those whose stomachs are not filled or those who cannot work to receive their fill. We also pray for those who cannot rest from their work.

#5:

Blessed are you, Lord our God, Sovereign of the world, who provides food for the entire world in your goodness, with grace, kindness and mercy. You supply bread for all living beings, for your kindness is everlasting. Because of your great goodness, we have never lacked food, nor will we ever lack it on account of your great name. For you are a God who nourishes and sustains all, and is good to all, and who supplies good for all your creatures which you have created. Blessed are you, God, who provides food for all.

Amen.

Session 3: Righteousness, the Lord's Supper, and Hunger

Note: *If your church does not celebrate the Lord's Supper every Sunday, consider doing it the Sunday you teach this lesson. I did so at the church where this program was first piloted.*

We will open each session with this Shabbat Table Prayer cited in the Introduction. As the leader, you may read this prayer, have a participant lead the prayer, or break it up into parts so that more may participate. The latter two options are preferred. Be sure to refer to its origins each week. The prayer:

Blessed are you, Lord our God, Sovereign of the world, who provides food for the entire world in your goodness, with grace, kindness and mercy. You supply bread for all living beings, for your kindness is everlasting. Because of your great goodness, we have never lacked food, nor will we ever lack it on account of your great name. For you are a God who nourishes and sustains all, and is good to all, and who supplies good for all your creatures which you have created. Blessed are you, God, who provides food for all.

Amen.

Goals:

- To examine food justice in the first-century in a particular context and Paul's response
- To examine food justice in the twenty-first century and consider a biblically-faithful response

Righteousness (5 minutes)

Begin by asking for some critical reflection on the prayer you have been praying each week. Ask questions like:

- Is there anything that seems wrong about this prayer?
- Is there anything that has left you uneasy hearing this prayer each week?

Hopefully, some questions should arise. In particular, you want a question asked about the universal claims of the prayer. Does God provide “food for the entire world” and “supply bread for all living beings”? What about those who have “lacked food”? Is God really one who “nourishes and sustains all, and is good to all, and who supplies good for all ... creatures”?

How do we face these claims when hunger is a reality in our world?

The Lord's Supper (20 minutes)

As a way of addressing this question, we will engage a passage from Paul's first letter to the Corinthian church on the subject of abuses at the Lord's Supper. Provide some basic context for the letter:

- Paul was integral to founding and establishing the church in Corinth, but other Christian leaders like Apollos and Peter had clout there (cf. 1:14-17, 2:1-5, and 3:5-10).
- The Corinthians were struggling with a number of divisive issues from food offered to idols, sexual immorality, and the role of certain spiritual practices (like speaking in tongues).
- Paul was constantly addressing problems of disunity and destabilizing social hierarchies (e.g., rich and poor, well-spoken and uneducated) in relation to these issues, including what appears to be a rather divided congregation when it came to the Lord's Supper.

Read together 1 Corinthians 11:17-22 first:

Now in the following instructions, I do not commend you, because when you come together it is not for the better but for the worse. For, to begin with, when you come together as a church, I hear there are divisions among you; and to some extent, I believe it. Indeed, there have to be factions among you, for only so will it become clear who among you are genuine.

When you come together, it is not really to eat the Lord's Supper. For when the time comes to eat, each of you goes ahead with your own supper, and one goes hungry and another becomes drunk. What!? Do you not have homes to eat and drink in? Or do you show contempt for the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing? What should I say to you? Should I commend you? In this matter I do not commend you! (NRSV)

Reconstruct the historical situation as best you can. What is happening at Corinth, according to this passage? The contention that the poor were arriving late to the Christian meal and the rich were taking all the food is a popular one, but does not necessarily account for what is happening in the passage.

For the facilitator, if needed: Scholar Bruce Winter alleges that in the presence of the poor, the wealthy would bring their own dinner to the Lord's Supper. They would partake in the ritual meal of bread and cup, but in the middle, they would also enjoy a rather lavish private supper of their own. They should have shared such a bounty with the poor among them, but they kept it for themselves. This would have reinforced class boundaries and hierarchies, something Paul was consistently working against in this letter. *Do not simply feed that information to the participants, but aid them in reconstructing this situation from the text in front of them.*

Next, continue reading with vv. 23-34.

For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me." In the same way he took the cup also, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me." For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be answerable for the body and blood of the Lord. Examine yourselves, and only then eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For all who eat and drink without discerning the body, eat and drink judgment against themselves. For this reason many of you are weak and ill, and some have died. But if we judged ourselves, we would not be judged. But when we are judged by the Lord, we are disciplined so that we may not be condemned along with the world.

So then, my brothers and sisters, when you come together to eat, wait for one another. If you are hungry, eat at home, so that when you come together, it will not be for your condemnation. About the other things I will give instructions when I come.

Spend some time considering Paul's advice. Ask:

- What is Paul's advice? What is the basis for this advice?
- Why do the Corinthians "eat and drink judgment against themselves"?

Recognize how Paul is redressing the divide between the wealthy and the poor (the hungry and the full) in this passage. Maybe note that the Greek word ἐκδέχεσθε in v. 33 rendered as “wait for,” means to receive or welcome. Paul bid them to welcome one another at the Lord’s Supper. How is that different than what they were doing?

Turn the gaze from the Scripture passage to the church. Ask:

- Do we do a good job at welcoming during our practice of the Lord’s Supper?
- What does our practice of the Lord’s Supper say to hungry people?
- Are we committed to making sure that everyone has enough to eat today?

Hunger (20 minutes)

Pivot from the focus on those in the church to the wider community. Engage the participants in a quick quiz. *The following questions are specific to the community in North Carolina where this lesson was developed. You can find analogous facts at <http://map.feedingamerica.org/county/2013/overall>. The first question and the later food waste statistics are national, and thus do not require adaptation.*

#1: How many people in the United States are “food insecure,” the statistical measure for hunger?

- A. About 15 million
- B. About 20 million
- C. About 35 million
- D. About 50 Million**

#2: What percentage of people in Durham County are “food insecure”?

- A. Almost 5%
- B. Almost 10%
- C. Almost 15%
- D. Almost 20%**

#3: Is child hunger greater or less than the overall food insecurity rate?

- A. Less
- B. Greater**

#4: How much food do you think that we waste each year in the United States?

- A. 100 million pounds
- B. 750 million pounds
- C. 7 billion pounds
- D. 126 trillion pounds**

#5: Is there enough food to go around?

- A. Yes
- B. No

Return to the question about the opening prayer. Read it again, if necessary. Ask:

- Does God provide food for all creatures? Has God provided for all of us?
- Then why are people hungry?

Ask if this situation bears any resemblance to the situation in Corinth. In both, there was presumably enough food to go around. Yet, some had food and some did not. But the spirit of the Lord's Supper is that we all remember Christ's provision for us in the bread and cup.

For the final discussion, brainstorm ways in which your church can confront hunger in its community. Ask:

- What is our church already doing to address hunger in our community?
 - Be sure that these ministries are actually addressing hunger. Serving at the local shelter/pantry provides a necessary volunteer service, but it does not actually address the fact that people are hungry.
- What are some concrete and specific ways we could address hunger in our community?

Necessary Sub-Questions

 - Do we know where people are hungry? Do we know them?
 - Do we know why they are hungry?
 - Do we understand how food insecure people can get food (e.g., SNAP requirements, local food bank guidelines, basic food costs)?

Be sure to emphasize that it is not their job to solve hunger in a 45-minute Bible Study. Instead, let this be a launching point for the church to consider how it could further engage issues of food insecurity and hunger. If the group is particularly enthusiastic about a particular ministry, encourage them to pursue it with relevant committees or ministers.

Conclude with the same Shabbat table blessing that begins each study. Dismiss to a service of communion.



Session 4: Hope, the Heavenly Banquet, and Eating Now

Note: *Consider sharing a meal together after the Bible Study as a context for the prayer the group crafts together at the end.*

We will open each session with this Shabbat Table Prayer cited in the Introduction. As the leader, you may read this prayer, have a participant lead the prayer, or break it up into parts so that more may participate. The latter two options are preferred. Be sure to refer to its origins each week. The prayer:

Blessed are you, Lord our God, Sovereign of the world, who provides food for the entire world in your goodness, with grace, kindness and mercy. You supply bread for all living beings, for your kindness is everlasting. Because of your great goodness, we have never lacked food, nor will we ever lack it on account of your great name. For you are a God who nourishes and sustains all, and is good to all, and who supplies good for all your creatures which you have created. Blessed are you, God, who provides food for all.

Amen.

Materials:

- Scripture Handouts (see the end of this section)

Goals:

- To reflect on the ultimate hope that Scripture offers us through the lens of the heavenly banquet symbol used across the Bible
- To foster a language of prayer that takes into account this hope and the concerns God has for all creation and people

Hope and the Heavenly Banquet (30 minutes)

One of the common symbols that the Bible uses to talk about the end is a banquet. In the Old and New Testaments, biblical authors use this picture of God hosting a banquet for God's people as a way to talk about God's intentions for the world. The Book of Revelation picked up on this theme and used it to great effect.

Recall, before reading, the context of Revelation – after all, many participants do not know and have distorted imaginations about what the book is actually addressing. Explain, if this understanding is not common to the group, that Revelation is not a book of prophecies for the elusive “end times,” but a book that uses vivid imagery

and metaphor to talk about God’s intentions for creation. It makes specific references to things like the Roman Empire, its military conquests, and the persecution of Christians – all things particular to its time. But it has some generalizable messages; indeed, messages that have echoes throughout Scripture.

We’ll read a passage about the heavenly banquet first and then examine some other passages of Scripture that use some similar language so that we can paint a picture of what John is trying to say in Revelation.

First, read Revelation 19:5-9 and 21:1-7, with the brief note of what happens in the middle.

And from the throne came a voice saying, “Praise our God, all you his servants, and all who fear him, small and great.” Then I heard what seemed to be the voice of a great multitude, like the sound of many waters and like the sound of mighty thunderpeals, crying out,

“Hallelujah! For the Lord our God the Almighty reigns.
Let us rejoice and exult and give him the glory,
for the marriage of the Lamb has come,
and his bride has made herself ready;
to her it has been granted to be clothed with fine linen,
bright and pure”

— for the fine linen is the righteous deeds of the saints.

And the angel said to me, “Write this: Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb.” And he said to me, “These are true words of God.”

Then, there is the great battle between Christ and what John refers to as the “Beast” in Revelation. God is ultimately victorious and imprisons the Beast. Then, John sees the marriage he described in what we just read:

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.

And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying,

“See, the home of God is among mortals.
He will dwell with them as their God;
they will be his peoples,
and God himself will be with them;
he will wipe every tear from their eyes.
Death will be no more;
mourning and crying and pain will be no more,
for the first things have passed away.”

And the one who was seated on the throne said, “See, I am making all things new.” Also he said, “Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true.”

Then he said to me, “It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life. Those who conquer will inherit these things, and I will be their God and they will be my children. But as for the cowardly, the faithless, the polluted, the murderers, the fornicators, the sorcerers, the idolaters, and all liars, their place will be in the lake that burns with fire and sulfur, which is the second death.”

Consider a few basic diagnostic questions.

- Where do you see food and drink in this passage?
 - For facilitator: especially note 19:9 and 21:6.
- What kind of meal is this? Who’s invited?
 - For facilitator: wedding banquet, the saints are invited
- What’s the context of this meal?
 - For facilitator: everything is being made new, God has triumphed over evil, God is caring for God’s people

Next, read some passages that use similar language to this one in order to get a bigger picture of what this image of a final supper means in biblical literature. The passages are listed on the attached worksheets. Break the participants up into small groups, one for each passage. The attached worksheets have the Revelation passage (Side B), one of the other Scripture passages (Side A), and some questions for the group to answer (Side A).

The questions are common to each worksheet:

- What does your passage have in common with the passage from Revelation?
- What does your passage, and the one from Revelation, say about God's intentions for the world?

Once they have had a few minutes to address their passage and the questions, come back together and share your findings. You do not need to guide them to specific answers, but be on the lookout for conclusions like these (the list is not exhaustive, pay attention to their answers):

- What does your passage have in common with the passage from Revelation?
 - For Isaiah 25:6-9: God intends to deliver God's people, the wiping of tears is an image they have in common, God's people will enjoy a feast at the time of deliverance
 - For Luke 14:12-24: the people who attend the banquet are called "blessed," not everyone comes to the dinner
 - For Luke 22:13-20, 24-27: Jesus will be at the meal (as host? provides the food?), the meal is associated with God's rule (kingdom in Luke)
- What does your passage, and the one from Revelation, say about God's intentions for the world?
 - For Isaiah 25:6-9: God will provide food for the people and defeat death and suffering; God will save God's people
 - For Luke 14:12-24: God turns things upside down at this meal – he invites "the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind" instead of the people you would expect to invite (e.g. the rich and influential); God wants the banquet to be well-attended, for God's house to be filled
 - For Luke 22:13-20, 24-27: God turns things upside down at this meal – the servant is the greatest in attendance
 - For Revelation: God will provide for God's children (e.g., give drink to the thirsty), relieve people of suffering, and make all things new

Ask:

- Does how we talk about God, even how we pray to God, talk about these realities?
- How much do we base our lives on this hope? Do we make decisions with this in mind?

Eating Now (15 minutes)

The whole time we have been doing this study, we've been using a table blessing. The prayer keep in mind a lot of these themes: that God provides, that God turns things upside down, that God is interested in our survival. Keeping in mind the intentions we've discovered that God has for the future, let's compose a table blessing of our own. We'll use it to bless the food tonight when we eat together!

They have passages of Scripture in front of them. Using some of the language and ideas found in the Scriptures, develop a table blessing based on the template below:

Blessed are you, Lord our God, _____
(title of God from these passages)

You _____
(something God does in these passages)

You _____
(something God does in these passages)

You _____
(something God does in these passages)

Because of your great goodness, _____
(something that will happen according to these passages)

And _____
(something that will happen according to these passages)

For you are a God who nourishes and sustains all, and is good to all, and who supplies good for all your creatures which you have created. Blessed are you, God, who provides food for all.

We give you thanks.

Amen.

Dismiss with the Shabbat Table blessing or with this blessing if you were unable to schedule a shared meal for later that day.



Scripture Worksheet #1 (SIDE A)

On this mountain the Lord of hosts
will make for all peoples a feast of rich food,
a feast of well-aged wines,
of rich food filled with marrow,
of well-aged wines strained clear.
And he will destroy on this mountain
the shroud that is cast over all peoples,
the sheet that is spread over all nations;
he will swallow up death forever.
Then the Lord God will wipe away the tears from all faces,
and the disgrace of his people
he will take away from all the earth,
for the Lord has spoken.
It will be said on that day,
Lo, this is our God;
we have waited for him,
so that he might save us.
This is the Lord for whom we have waited;
let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation.

Isaiah 25:6-9 (NRSV)

Questions for Discussion

- What does your passage have in common with the passage from Revelation (see Side B)?
- What does your passage, and the one from Revelation, say about God's intentions for the world?

Scripture Worksheet #1 (SIDE B)

And from the throne came a voice saying, “Praise our God, all you his servants, and all who fear him, small and great.” Then I heard what seemed to be the voice of a great multitude, like the sound of many waters and like the sound of mighty thunderpeals, crying out, “Hallelujah! For the Lord our God the Almighty reigns. Let us rejoice and exult and give him the glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and his bride has made herself ready; to her it has been granted to be clothed with fine linen, bright and pure” — for the fine linen is the righteous deeds of the saints.

And the angel said to me, “Write this: Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb.” And he said to me, “These are true words of God.”

...

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.

And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them as their God; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away.”

And the one who was seated on the throne said, “See, I am making all things new.” Also he said, “Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true.”

Then he said to me, “It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life. Those who conquer will inherit these things, and I will be their God and they will be my children. But as for the cowardly, the faithless, the polluted, the murderers, the fornicators, the sorcerers, the idolaters, and all liars, their place will be in the lake that burns with fire and sulfur, which is the second death.”

Revelation 19:5-9, 21:1-7 (NRSV)

Scripture Worksheet #2 (SIDE A)

[Jesus] said also to the one who had invited him [to dinner], “When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.”

One of the dinner guests, on hearing this, said to him, “Blessed is anyone who will eat bread in the kingdom of God!”

Then Jesus said to him, “Someone gave a great dinner and invited many. At the time for the dinner he sent his slave to say to those who had been invited, ‘Come; for everything is ready now.’ But they all alike began to make excuses. The first said to him, ‘I have bought a piece of land, and I must go out and see it; please accept my regrets.’ Another said, ‘I have bought five yoke of oxen, and I am going to try them out; please accept my regrets.’ Another said, ‘I have just been married, and therefore I cannot come.’

So the slave returned and reported this to his master. Then the owner of the house became angry and said to his slave, ‘Go out at once into the streets and lanes of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame.’ And the slave said, ‘Sir, what you ordered has been done, and there is still room.’ Then the master said to the slave, ‘Go out into the roads and lanes, and compel people to come in, so that my house may be filled. For I tell you, none of those who were invited will taste my dinner.’”

Luke 14:12-24 (NRSV)

Questions for Discussion

- What does your passage have in common with the passage from Revelation (see Side B)?
- What does your passage, and the one from Revelation, say about God’s intentions for the world?

Scripture Worksheet #2 (SIDE B)

And from the throne came a voice saying, “Praise our God, all you his servants, and all who fear him, small and great.” Then I heard what seemed to be the voice of a great multitude, like the sound of many waters and like the sound of mighty thunderpeals, crying out, “Hallelujah! For the Lord our God the Almighty reigns. Let us rejoice and exult and give him the glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and his bride has made herself ready; to her it has been granted to be clothed with fine linen, bright and pure” — for the fine linen is the righteous deeds of the saints.

And the angel said to me, “Write this: Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb.” And he said to me, “These are true words of God.”

...

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.

And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them as their God; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away.”

And the one who was seated on the throne said, “See, I am making all things new.” Also he said, “Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true.”

Then he said to me, “It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life. Those who conquer will inherit these things, and I will be their God and they will be my children. But as for the cowardly, the faithless, the polluted, the murderers, the fornicators, the sorcerers, the idolaters, and all liars, their place will be in the lake that burns with fire and sulfur, which is the second death.”

Revelation 19:5-9, 21:1-8 (NRSV)

Scripture Worksheet #3 (SIDE A)

So [the disciples] went and found everything as [Jesus] had told them; and they prepared the Passover meal. When the hour came, [Jesus] took his place at the table, and the apostles with him.

He said to them, “I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer; for I tell you, I will not eat it until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God.”

Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he said, “Take this and divide it among yourselves; for I tell you that from now on I will not drink of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes.”

Then he took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying, “This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.”

And he did the same with the cup after supper, saying, “This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood.”

...

A dispute also arose among them as to which one of them was to be regarded as the greatest.

But he said to them, “The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those in authority over them are called benefactors. But not so with you; rather the greatest among you must become like the youngest, and the leader like one who serves. For who is greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one at the table? But I am among you as one who serves.”

Luke 22:13-20, 24-27 (NRSV)

Questions for Discussion

- What does your passage have in common with the passage from Revelation (see Side B)?
- What does your passage, and the one from Revelation, say about God’s intentions for the world?

Scripture Worksheet #3 (SIDE B)

And from the throne came a voice saying, “Praise our God, all you his servants, and all who fear him, small and great.” Then I heard what seemed to be the voice of a great multitude, like the sound of many waters and like the sound of mighty thunderpeals, crying out, “Hallelujah! For the Lord our God the Almighty reigns. Let us rejoice and exult and give him the glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and his bride has made herself ready; to her it has been granted to be clothed with fine linen, bright and pure” — for the fine linen is the righteous deeds of the saints.

And the angel said to me, “Write this: Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb.” And he said to me, “These are true words of God.”

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Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.

And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them as their God; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away.”

And the one who was seated on the throne said, “See, I am making all things new.” Also he said, “Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true.”

Then he said to me, “It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life. Those who conquer will inherit these things, and I will be their God and they will be my children. But as for the cowardly, the faithless, the polluted, the murderers, the fornicators, the sorcerers, the idolaters, and all liars, their place will be in the lake that burns with fire and sulfur, which is the second death.”

Revelation 19:5-9, 21:1-8 (NRSV)

