

The Lord's Supper



Bread,
Wine, and
the Word

Goal of the Study

We will learn about what the Bible and Lutheran Confessions say about the Sacrament of the Altar, and how this incredible gift stands at the heart of the worship life of the Church. The goal of the study is that each person comes away with a deeper appreciation of the gifts found at the table of the Lord. Over these three weeks we will progress through the following:

- A Biblical history of the Eucharist.
- What do Lutherans believe about the Supper?
- Why and how should I take Communion?



Part 1



The Wedding Banquet

The Tree of Life

The first type of the Eucharist to be examined is that of the two trees standing in the heart of our first home in Eden. By the fruit of the Tree of Life, we received our immortality, and by the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge, we fell into death. In the Tree of Life therefore, we see a picture of a kind of pre-Fall communion, where Adam and Eve ate and drank with God in the shade of that Tree. Further, Church fathers like Origen of Alexandria taught that the Tree of Knowledge was likely a grape vine and thus the fruit by which we fell is the fruit by which we are made alive in Communion.



Abraham and the Three Angels

Meals with God don't end east of Eden. Rather, God is constantly trying to sit down at the table with His people throughout the Old Testament. One such occasion is when God visits Abraham, appearing as three angelic strangers (Genesis 18). Abraham offers the three men hospitality, in the form of bread and meat from the fattened calf. Hebrews 13:2 points to this having been done without Abraham realizing was hosting the Creator of the universe—at least at first—indicating a new hiddenness of God at the meals wherein we meet with Him going forward.



Dining on Sinai

“Then Moses went up, also Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel, and they saw the God of Israel. And there was under His feet as it were a paved work of sapphire stone, and it was like the very heavens in its clarity. But on the nobles of the children of Israel He did not lay His hand. So they saw God, and they ate and drank” (Ex. 24:9-11). Here again we see God’s people, now represented by the elders of Israel, eating and drinking with God like their forefather Abraham.



Provision in the Wilderness

In John 6:41-60, Jesus speaks in reference to the manna that the Jews' ancestors ate in the desert. He explains that even though they received this bread, they still died and could not live in eternity with God. Jesus is the Bread of Life, the new manna that will never go away and will give our souls life for all eternity. The Jews in Moses' time question the miracle of the manna: "the Israelites asked one another, 'What is this?' for they did not know what it was" (Ex. 16:15). The Jews in Jesus' time question the same thing. They hear Jesus saying "I am the Bread of Life," and they question Him for they do not know who He really is.



Hearth Cakes

As we recently read during Immerse, Elijah once had to flee into the wilderness, and there he prayed for death: “This is enough, O Lord! Take my life, for I am no better than my fathers.” He lay down and fell asleep under the broom tree, but then an angel touched him and ordered him to get up and eat. He looked and there at his head was a hearth cake and a jug of water. After he ate and drank, he lay down again but the angel of the Lord came back a second time, touched him, and ordered, “Get up and eat, else the journey will be too long for you!” He got up, ate and drank; then strengthened by that food, he walked forty days and forty nights to the mountain of God, Horeb (1 Kings 19:4-8).



Hearth Cakes (continued)

Elijah in some way repeats the experience of the chosen people as they fled from Egypt pursued by the pharaoh. The food that the angel gives him has been seen in Christian tradition as a figure of the Eucharist, given that by the grace of this Sacrament men enjoy the greatest peace and tranquility of conscience during the present life; and when the hour of departing from this world have arrives, like Elijah, who by the sustainance of the bread baked on the hearth, walked to Horeb the mount of God, they too are invigorated by the strengthening of this heavenly food.



The Wedding at Cana

While attending a wedding at Cana, Christ transformed water into wine. It would take a full day just to unpack how this event ties into dozens of Old Testament images, but for our purposes today, we can see how it continues the image of the wedding feast developed through the OT (developed poignantly in Ezekiel 16, Joel 3, and Isaiah 25) as well as pointing forward to the Last Supper, where Christ, having already turned water to wine, turns wine into His very Blood.



Part 2



A Sacrifice of
Thanksgiving

Eucharistic Sacrifice

Ever since the Reformation, Protestant traditions have been wary about tying sacrifice language to the Eucharist due to papist abuses. However, the image of Holy Communion as a sacrificial meal is clearly Scriptural and needs to be recovered in some form. While Lutherans would reject the Eucharist being an atoning or propitiatory sacrifice, it is certainly a sacrifice of thanksgiving, as is clearly seen by the examination of some of the Old Testament types of the meal.



Melchizedek

Melchizedek was “a priest of God Most High” (Hebrews 7:1) and king of Salem. He is mentioned in the story in Genesis 14, when Abram (soon to be Abraham) comes to Melchizedek after winning a battle. Melchizedek gives Abram a blessing and brings an offering of bread and wine (Gen 14:17-20). Abraham then offers the priest-king a tithe of one-tenth of all he has.

As we see in Psalm 110, Jesus is the priest appointed by God “according to the order of Melchizedek.” Thus, this is a story of Christ or a type of Christ offering the people of God bread and wine, and their offering a sacrifice in return, establishing a precedent for the Eucharistic meal.



Passover

When the Israelites were in slavery in Egypt, God sent Moses with a gospel to proclaim: that He was going to lead them out of bondage to the land promised to their ancestors. This promised deliverance was a grand ritual and cosmic battle, one in which God demanded the Israelites offer a lamb as a guilt offering for their sins. This sacrifice was then repeated, every year, until the true Lamb of God was sacrificed, and the true Passover meal was instituted, wherein our God gives us His body to eat and His Blood to drink.



Offerings of Thanksgiving

The Passover is the primary Old Testament sacrifice informing our understanding of the Eucharist but another is the *todah*, a sacrifice offered in ancient Israel after a person had been saved from a life-threatening situation (see Lev. 7:11-15). Here's how one writer describes the sacrifice:

“The lamb would be sacrificed in the Temple and the bread for the meal would be consecrated the moment the lamb was sacrificed. The bread and meat, along with wine, would constitute the elements of the sacred *todah* meal, which would be accompanied by prayers and songs of thanksgiving”

Tim Gray, “From Jewish Passover to Christian Eucharist: The Story of the Todah.” Lay Witness (Nov/Dec. 2002).



Part 3



A Sacrifice of
Thanksgiving

The Bread of the Presence

Leviticus 24:5–7 outlines requirements for twelve loaves of bread to be baked and placed in the presence of God as a reminder of His provision and presence with the Israelites. This is the bread eaten by David and his men while they are on campaign, pointing to the eventual unfolding of the royal priesthood to all believers (see Matthew 12:3-8). In this episode, Christ treats His Disciples as priests, able to partake of the Bread of Presence on the Sabbath, with the Lord of the Sabbath Himself.



House of God

“The Jews then said to Him, ‘What sign can you show us for doing this?’ Jesus answered and said to them, ‘Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up.’ The Jews said, ‘This temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and you will raise it up in three days?’ But he was speaking about the temple of his body” (John 2:18-21).

Jesus identifies the temple of Jerusalem with his own body, and by so doing refers to one of the most profound truths about himself—the Incarnation. After the Ascension of the Lord into heaven this real and very special presence of God among men is continued in the sacrament of the Blessed Eucharist.



House of Bread

St. Thomas Aquinas mentions two reasons Jesus chose to be born in Bethlehem. First, He wanted to be born in the city where David was born “so that the promise [made to David] would be shown to have been fulfilled from the very place of his birth”. Secondly, as St. Gregory the Great says, “Bethlehem” means “house of bread.”

“The place He was born,” says St. Bede, “is rightly called the “House of Bread”, because He came down from heaven to earth to give us the food of heavenly life and to satisfy us with the flavor of eternal sweetness.” Since the Church contains within her the Bread of Life, she can be called “the perpetual Bethlehem”



Final Thoughts

This study has tried—and hopefully succeeded—to juggle three very interconnected Biblical themes: the banquet, the sacrifice, and God with us. Each of these inform how we ought to think about Holy Communion, and form the groundwork for the next two weeks. I pray that by this exploration of these themes, you come away from this study understanding that the Eucharist doesn't come out of nowhere on Maundy Thursday, but rather is the culmination of many Old Testament themes and prophecies.

