

Session I

The Last Supper

Getting Started

Session Goals

This session is intended to help participants . . .

- explore the Gospels' account of Jesus' last supper with his disciples;
- understand how Jesus' last supper recalls the meaning inherent in the Passover Seder and anticipates the significance of Holy Communion;
- consider the themes of deliverance, repentance, forgiveness, and friendship that emerge from the story of the Last Supper.

Opening Prayer

To you, O LORD, I lift up my soul.

O my God, in you I trust;

do not let me be put to shame;

do not let my enemies exult over me. . . .

Turn to me and be gracious to me,
for I am lonely and afflicted.
Relieve the troubles of my heart,
and bring me out of my distress.
Consider my affliction and my trouble,
and forgive all my sins. (Psalm 25:1-2, 16-18)

Biblical Foundation

On the first day of Unleavened Bread, when the Passover lamb is sacrificed . . . he took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it he broke it, gave it to them, and said, “Take; this is my body.” Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he gave it to them, and all of them drank from it. He said to them, “This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many. Truly I tell you, I will never again drink of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God.” (Mark 14:12, 22-25)

Opening Activity

Because this session focuses on the connection between the Passover meal Jesus shared with his disciples and the church’s appropriation of that event in the Eucharist meal, prepare a traditional Seder plate and place it in a central place for the group to see.

Consult a reliable reference source, either in a book (*Make Your Own Passover Seder*, by Alan Abraham Kay and Jo Kay) or online (www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org), to find instructions for preparing the Seder meal ingredients and arranging the plate. Or simply locate and print color copies of a traditional Seder plate with the various foods arranged on it. Alongside the Seder plate, place on top of a white linen cloth a chalice and some bread on a plate, to represent the elements on your church’s Communion table.

Help the group to make connections between the Seder and the Eucharist, recognizing that both rituals involve

remembering the origins of the meals, explaining the significance of the symbolic meal ingredients, and saying why the meal is important. Ask the group to respond to this question in reference to both the Passover and the Last Supper: *Why is this night different from all other nights?*

Learning Together

Video Presentation and Discussion

Play the video segment for Session 1.

Running Time: 11:25 minutes

SIGHTS

- The traditional site of the upper room (a vaulted room built by the Crusaders in the 12th century AD)
- A facsimile of a *triclinium* (u-shaped dining table common in the Roman world of the first century AD)
- A Seder plate

KEY INSIGHTS

- Jesus specifically chose Peter and John to prepare the Passover meal.
- It is thought that the site of the upper room where Jesus shared his last meal with his disciples is the same room where 120 disciples gathered on the Day of Pentecost to witness the coming of the Holy Spirit.
- Though no one knows for certain, the room may have been the place where the disciples fled after Jesus was crucified.
- The Last Supper was likely eaten around a *triclinium*. Reconstructing the seating of the group around a *triclinium*, we see that Jesus would have been flanked on his right by John and on his left by—Judas Iscariot.

- According to Rabbi Amy Katz, the ritual Passover meal is intended to make the vital story of Israel's deliverance accessible to all those around the table.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- What do you think about Judas Iscariot being seated right beside Jesus at the table and already determined to betray him? What does that say to you about the risks of Christian discipleship?
- In what way does your participation in the regular ritual of Holy Communion help you to recall your own experiences of deliverance?
- Talk about a time when you truly felt that sharing the Lord's Supper was both profoundly sacred and deeply joyful.

Book Study and Discussion

Ask for volunteers to read aloud, one at a time, the following excerpts from Chapter 1 of the book *24 Hours That Changed the World*. Use the questions that follow each excerpt to guide discussion.

The story of the betrayal winds its way through the rest of the Gospel accounts of the final twenty-four hours of Jesus' life. Before the night was through, Judas would betray Jesus; Peter would deny him; and the disciples would desert him, leaving Jesus utterly alone as he faced trial at the hands of his enemies.

The echoes of Jesus' prediction and of the acts of betrayal by those closest to Jesus are still discomfiting. In our own age, when church leaders have abused children, embezzled funds, and more, we realize that such betrayals are commonplace. Jesus might well have said, "All of you will betray me"; and with that realization, we must look finally at ourselves (page 22).

- How do you see yourself when you approach the altar to take Communion? What do you remember of the story of Jesus when you eat the bread and take the cup?
- In what way does your participation in the regular ritual of the Eucharist meal help you recall your own experiences of deliverance?

The Last Supper was meant to be repeated in commemoration of the new covenant, just as the Passover Seder was meant to commemorate the central sign of God's saving act in the Hebrew Bible. This meal, this new Passover, the Eucharist or Holy Communion, would be a perpetual reminder of God's love, his grace, and the sacrifice of his Son. It would be the meal by which we as Christians would remember our story. By means of it, our lives would be reshaped (page 26).

- How would you say the observance of Holy Communion defines or shapes who you are?

In the hours before Jesus would be arrested, tried, and held for crucifixion, he was with twelve men who were his companions and intimates, men with whom he had prayed, worshiped, and shared life. When he went to pray, knowing he would die, he asked those who were closest to him to pray with him.

Remember, these close companions were not perfect. They had let him down and would do so again. One would even betray him. Still, they were the best friends he had; and they were with him as he approached his darkest hour (pages 27–28).

- If you were sitting down to what you knew to be your last meal, whom would you want sitting around the table with you?

Bible Study and Discussion

Ask for volunteers to read aloud the following passages of Scripture one at a time. Use the question that follows each passage to guide discussion.

EXODUS 12:21-28

- What do you say (or should you say) to your children when they ask what the Lord's Supper means?

JEREMIAH 31:31-34

- What are the implications of being bound to God by a covenant inscribed inwardly on our hearts rather than on stone tablets?

JOHN 15:12-17

- What does it mean to accept the bread and the cup during Communion not only as Jesus' disciples, but as his friends?

1 CORINTHIANS 11:23-32

- Why did Paul consider it so crucial that partakers of the Lord's Supper "examine" themselves first? To what extent do we do that today?

Wrapping Up

In Perspective

To conclude the session, ask group members to consider and discuss one or more of the following perspectives. For the painting, print out a color copy and display it or pass it around for the group to see.

IN THE UPPER ROOM

Imagine you are reclining at a table in the dimly lit room. Take in your surroundings. What do you see? What do you hear? What do you smell? How does the food taste? Are you near enough to touch anyone? If so, whom?

INSIDE ONE OF JESUS' DISCIPLES

Imagine you are one of Jesus' disciples, reclining around a low table—a fisherman, perhaps one of the sons of Zebedee. You have been following Jesus for some time now, and often you have not been certain of what he was doing or why he was doing it. But you have witnessed some remarkable, even miraculous, things—thousands of people fed with a couple of fish and a few loaves of bread! Now Jesus is turning toward you, offering you a piece of bread he has just blessed. What could this mean? What do you feel? What do you think?

IN FRONT OF DALI'S THE SACRAMENT OF THE LAST SUPPER

Salvador Dali was the twentieth century's most famous surrealist painter. His depiction of the Last Supper includes both dreamlike elements and precise symmetry. Study the painting. Why do think Dali chose to combine the surreal and the realistic? Consider which aspects of Jesus' story Dali wants the viewer to connect in the event of the Last Supper.

Closing Prayer

May the God of steadfastness and encouragement grant you to live in harmony with one another, in accordance with Christ Jesus, so that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

(Romans 15:5-6)

