



CONNECTING WITH
THE SACRAMENTS

EUCCHARIST

Bread of Life

Joshua J. Whitfield



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Introduction

Alive in the Word brings you resources to deepen your understanding of Scripture, offer meaning for your life today, and help you to pray and act in response to God's word.

Use any volume of **Alive in the Word** in the way best suited to you.

- **For individual learning and reflection**, consider this an invitation to prayerfully journal in response to the questions you find along the way. And be prepared to move from head to heart and then to action.
- **For group learning and reflection**, arrange for three sessions where you will use the material provided as the basis for faith sharing and prayer. You may ask group members to read each chapter in advance and come prepared with questions answered. In this kind of session, plan to be together for about an hour. Or, if your group prefers, read and respond to the questions together without advance preparation. With this approach, it's helpful to plan on spending more time for each group session in order to adequately work through each of the chapters.

- **For a parish-wide event or use within a larger group,** provide each person with a copy of this volume, and allow time during the event for quiet reading, group discussion and prayer, and then a final commitment by each person to some simple action in response to what he or she learned.

This volume on the topic of Eucharist is one of several volumes that explore **Connecting with the Sacraments**. Scripture offers a wealth of ways to reflect on the grace we access in our sacramental lives. By spending time with passages that focus on the spiritual dynamics of each sacrament, our own experiences of the sacraments will deepen. Our ability to appreciate how God works in our lives and in the lives of others will expand.

Prologue

“Blessed are those who have been called to the wedding feast of the Lamb” (Rev 19:9). John of Patmos was commanded to write these words after he heard heaven’s victory song, just before he saw a vision of the new Jerusalem, a new heaven and a new earth. An angelic decree, these words declare God’s victory and the destiny of the saints. But they are also an invitation at once ancient and new, an invitation still open to each of us.

This book is about the Eucharist. It is about how God repeats this invitation to the “feast” throughout history and how God feeds his people. Scripture is clear: God calls us to be in union with him in a way that is mysterious but very real. Calling the Israelites out of Egypt, calling all people in Christ in the church—what John hears in the book of Revelation is not just an invitation to a feast but an invitation to become a family, to become the people of God. We believe the Eucharist helps to bring this about every day across the world and upon more altars than can be counted, by means of a meal to which Jesus calls us, a meal he has commanded us to repeat.

The three passages we will consider are set respectively in the desert, the synagogue, and the city. Personally fundamental to my own growth in faith, especially faith in the Eucharist, these passages remind me that the Eucharist is essential to Christian life, belonging to every Christian everywhere, and that the Eucharist is part of God's eternal plan. This story that begins in the desert continues in our churches and carries us into heaven, into the very presence of God.

Beyond sharing the Scriptures and my faith with you, what more can I say about this great mystery of the Eucharist? It is beyond words. It is God's mysterious way. But I think it's beautiful. And I hope you do too.

The Desert: Covenant and Sacrifice



Begin with a few quiet moments, asking God to assist you in your prayer and study. Then read this account of a sacred meal from Exodus 24.

Exodus 24:1-11

¹Moses himself was told: Come up to the LORD, you and Aaron, with Nadab, Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel. You shall bow down at a distance. ²Moses alone is to come close to the LORD; the others shall not come close, and the people shall not come up with them.

³When Moses came to the people and related all the words and ordinances of the LORD, they all answered with one voice, “We will do everything that the LORD has told us.” ⁴Moses then wrote down all the words of the LORD and, rising early in the morning, he built at the foot of the mountain an altar and twelve sacred stones for the twelve tribes of Israel. ⁵Then, having sent young men of the Israelites to offer burnt offerings and sacrifice young bulls as communion offerings to the LORD, ⁶Moses took half of the blood and put it in large bowls; the

other half he splashed on the altar. ⁷Taking the book of the covenant, he read it aloud to the people, who answered, “All that the LORD has said, we will hear and do.” ⁸Then he took the blood and splashed it on the people, saying, “This is the blood of the covenant which the LORD has made with you according to all these words.”

⁹Moses then went up with Aaron, Nadab, Abihu, and seventy elders of Israel, ¹⁰and they beheld the God of Israel. Under his feet there appeared to be sapphire tilework, as clear as the sky itself. ¹¹Yet he did not lay a hand on these chosen Israelites. They saw God, and they ate and drank.

Following a brief time of reflection on the desert account from Exodus 24, consider the background information provided below in Setting the Scene. The questions in the margins may be used for personal reflection or group discussion.

Setting the Scene

In the desert, something remarkable happened. Escaped from Egypt and encamped in the “wilderness of Sinai” (Exod 19:1), former Israelite slaves became the people of God, “a kingdom of priests, a holy nation” (19:6). God cared for them there, feeding and guiding them by miracle and awe along the way. And yet it was excruciatingly difficult. The Israelites grumbled, complained, and sometimes even desired their former subjugation (Exod 17:1-7; Num 11:1-5).

But they learned how to listen. And they even saw God. I’ve been in that desert. Have you? It’s

a believable story—that God would cut a covenant and even show himself in so harsh a place. We are vulnerable in the desert. We are not in control; God is.

The first part of Exodus tells of God’s liberation of the Hebrews from Egypt, followed by the giving of the Ten Commandments and the covenant at Sinai (Exod 19–23). Exodus 24 describes the solemnization of the covenant in remarkable rituals of ascent, sacrifice, and a meal that is transformed into a mystical, sacred experience that language fails to fully describe.

Here—in covenant, blood, and feast—Moses, his companions, and seventy elders of Israel see God. God is present to them. It is feast. It is communion. For Christians, this extraordinary meal—this remarkable thing that happened in the desert—ultimately points to Jesus and to the sacred meal the church celebrates Sunday by Sunday and every day all over the world.

Scholars have critically debated Exodus 24:1–11 for centuries. It is not difficult to understand why: verses 1 and 2 stand in tension if not contradiction; verses 3–8 seem artificially fitted between verses 1–2 and 9–11; and verse 7 seems to repeat verse 3. We can see why most scholars agree this is a “redacted” text—an edited final product, a fusion of multiple sources.

Yet this shouldn’t trouble us. It certainly didn’t trouble ancient scholars. Rather than focusing on sources and complex historical background, we’ll focus on the passage as it stands—in its final, inspired, canonical form. Thus we will not only receive the story as it is

told, but we will also be able to read the details, allusions, and themes within it as elements of a fuller theological and spiritual reading, pointing us ultimately to the Eucharist.

How essential do you think the Eucharist is to the church? How do you understand the relationship between the two?

Exodus 24:1-11 will now be explored a few verses at a time to deepen your understanding of the passage. Reflect on the text and questions along the way.

Understanding the Scene Itself

¹Moses himself was told: Come up to the LORD, you and Aaron, with Nadab, Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel. You shall bow down at a distance. ²Moses alone is to come close to the LORD; the others shall not come close, and the people shall not come up with them.

³When Moses came to the people and related all the words and ordinances of the LORD, they all answered with one voice, “We will do everything that the LORD has told us.”

