

CHAPTER 27



THE STORY OF THE
WOMAN WHO WIPED
THE FEET OF JESUS

A Prostitute Lets Her Hair Down,
Scandalizing Everyone but Jesus

*Blessed are you when people hate you, when
they exclude you and insult you and reject
your name as evil, because of the Son of
Man.*

LUKE 6:22

Before Herod's encounter with Jesus just before the crucifixion, the Galilean rabbi had built up a large following of people, some of them drawn from the lowest ranks of society. One of these now sits on the floor with a handful of others, beggars mostly. Unlike the dull-colored robes that help them blend into the wall they lean against, her woven red cloak demands attention. Her hair is swept upward, under a gold-colored head covering, revealing a well-shaped face. Dark eyes find their complement in full, red lips that seem always on the verge of smiling.

Yet Simon passes her by without allowing himself the luxury of a sideways glance. Tonight he has thrown open his doors to one and all, even to women like her. Anyone who wants supper can have it as long as he or she agrees to wait until the honored guests have finished their meal. It is the usual custom, a way to seek God's blessing and display one's generosity to the less fortunate. So they wait—silently, politely, willing their stomachs to be quiet lest they disturb the banquet that will soon commence.

She is glad to be among them, though it's not the feast that has drawn her. She is waiting for someone and in her lap she holds an alabaster jar filled with expensive perfume.

Simon surveys the room, his glance resting not on the riffraff who lean against the wall but on several broad couches arranged in the shape of a *U* that will provide a comfortable place for his honored guests to recline and enjoy their leisurely meal. A table filled with figs, fish, grapes, bread, olives, dates, and roasted goat meat will be set in place once every man has taken his place.

He knows that most of his guests will be eager, as he is, to examine the controversial young rabbi, the one they call Jesus. Many of Simon's fellow Pharisees have their doubts about the man. For one thing, he consorts with tax collectors, Roman stooges who are disguised as Jews. These men grow fat by squeezing money from their own people, taking their cut and then passing the rest on to the Romans. For another, his disciples seem crude and uneducated, rough fellows who are always eating and drinking and never fasting. They have even been spotted picking grain and eating it on the Sabbath. And why, when there are six days a week to work, would Jesus choose to desecrate the seventh day by healing a man with a withered arm as he had recently done?

Still, Jesus attracts ever larger crowds, drawing from the unschooled masses, who are always clamoring for his next miracle. His following has grown so quickly that certain Pharisees have come from Jerusalem for a closer look. Simon has spoken to these men. He shares their concerns.

Lately, another sensational story has been making the rounds. A few days ago, they say, Jesus healed a paralyzed man who was lowered through a rooftop into his presence. Simon has no problem with the idea that a sage could possess healing powers. But Jesus had the audacity to tell the man his sins were forgiven—an obvious blasphemy since only God can forgive sin.

Simon has invited the rabbi to his home to see for himself, to test him and discover what he is made of. Perhaps the tales people tell of him are not all true. Jesus is young. There may still be time to turn him to the right way.

As is customary, Simon honors his guests by welcoming each man with a kiss. He provides water for washing the dust from their feet and olive oil to serve as soap for their hands and anointing oil for their heads.

But what of Jesus? How will Simon greet this popular rabbi when he arrives? Hosting a sage is considered a great honor. But what if the rabbi's teachings are corrupt? Simon has thought long and hard about this and has decided that too warm a welcome could be misconstrued. His other guests might draw the wrong conclusions.

Meanwhile, the young woman continues to wait, sitting quietly in the corner of the room. Simon seems oblivious to her presence. But she notices everything. To pass the time, her mind drifts back to her first encounter with the rabbi. She was one among hundreds, eager to see him perform wonders and hear him preach. In the midst of the enormous crowd, it seemed to her as though he were speaking only to her.

Blessed are you who are poor,
for yours is the kingdom of God.
Blessed are you who hunger now,
for you will be satisfied.
Blessed are you who weep now,
for you will laugh.
Blessed are you when people hate you,
when they exclude you and insult you
and reject your name as evil,
because of the Son of Man.

“Do not judge, and you will not be judged. Do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven.”

As she sits on the hillside, the wind carries his voice to her across the crowd and his words fall strong and clear like shafts of light into the darkness of her soul. She begins to pray aloud

as many others in the crowd are doing, the tears streaming down their faces.

As she prays she feels a warm, enfolding presence. The Shekinah of God that has descended on her and many others. No longer afraid to face and name her sins, she calls them to mind one by one and then leaves them in the hands of God. There is so much she has to admit and surrender. Rebellion, hurt, rage, unfaithfulness, shame.

Names pass her lips as well, and she sees the faces of the men who paid to share her bed. In this sacred moment she finds the strength to give each man into God's own hands. She has been the object of their lust, and now they will be the object of God's mercy. As she forgives each one, a knot of worthlessness unties itself inside her and is replaced with a sense of peace and freedom.

Shekinah is a Hebrew word that refers to the experienced presence of God dwelling with his people. While it is not a word that occurs in the Bible, the Jews used it to designate the presence of God in Israel's history. ■

She hears the words of Jesus again, "But love your enemies, do good to them, and lend to them without expecting to get anything back. Then your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High, because he is kind to the ungrateful and wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful."

That God loves sinners, this is the message that has drawn her, a wonder that has altered her life. She had hardly imagined that God could feel anything but disgust for her. That he could cherish her and call her his daughter, this upends her world.

Her thoughts are interrupted by Jesus's arrival at Simon's house. Now there is no crowd separating them, only a small group of men conversing with Simon. She watches as he walks into the room. To her surprise, there is no amiable welcome—no kiss, no water for his

feet, no oil for his head. Simon merely nods in acknowledgment of his guest and then turns his back, continuing to talk with others.

The insult is obvious. She feels a sudden tension entering the room. Everyone expects the young rabbi to react. Will he explode with anger or shake the dust from his feet and leave the Pharisee's house?

She is used to snubs from men like Simon. Even men who pay for the privilege of abusing her body maintain the pretense of a righteous life by keeping their distance in public places. But she has never seen such treatment of a rabbi. Hospitality is a sacred trust. To treat a guest this way brings shame.

She feels it strongly, as though Jesus has just been slapped in the face and the pain has radiated across the room and landed on her cheek. Her face flushes from the insult.

But Jesus shows no sign of anger. Instead of turning his back on the gathering as one might expect, he merely walks over to a couch and reclines, waiting for the meal to begin.

But this in itself is shocking. For it is always the eldest and wisest who reclines first while the rest of the guests take their places in order of seniority. As one of the youngest men in the room, Jesus has made a remarkable statement.

Missing nothing of what is happening, the woman leaves her place near the wall, concerned by how her beloved rabbi is being treated. She had intended to anoint his hands and head with perfume as a way of thanking him for his gift of forgiveness. But since he is already reclining, she can only reach his feet. Sensing the rejection he must feel, she kneels before him and begins to weep, and then she does the unthinkable. Uncovering her head, she unwinds long, dark strands of hair, using them to wipe the flood of tears that have fallen on his feet. Kissing his feet, she anoints them with

the perfume. With this dramatic gesture, too intimate for public display, she shares his humiliation and performs a service his host has deliberately withheld.

“Disgusting!” Simon thinks. “Clearly, my concerns regarding this man are well founded.” For he knows that no self-respecting woman would show her hair to her husband until their wedding night. Simon sees her gesture as a declaration of intimacy.

“If he were a prophet,” Simon thinks, “he would know who is touching him and what kind of woman she is—that she is a sinner.” But instead of rebuking her, Jesus appears to welcome her attention.

“Simon,” Jesus says, as though reading his thoughts, “I have something to tell you.”

“Tell me, teacher,” he replies.

“Two people owed money to a certain moneylender. One owed him five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. Neither of them had the money to pay him back, so he forgave the debts of both. Now which of them will love him more?”

Simon knows that five hundred denarii is a lot of money—two years’ wages for a laborer while fifty denarii represents only two months’ worth of wages—so he makes the expected reply: “I suppose the one who had the bigger debt forgiven.”

“You have judged correctly,” Jesus says. And by his tone, Simon catches a hint that the rabbi is also inferring that Simon has not always judged correctly.

Turning toward the woman who has exposed herself to ridicule for his sake, Jesus continues. “Do you see this woman, Simon?”

The question forces Simon to look at the woman, to see her for the first time.

“I came into your house,” Jesus continues. “You did not give me any water for my feet, but she wet my feet with her tears and wiped

them with her hair. You did not give me a kiss, but this woman, from the time I entered, has not stopped kissing my feet. You did not put oil on my head, but she has poured perfume on my feet. Therefore, I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven—as her great love has shown. But whoever has been forgiven little loves little.”

Then Jesus turns his attention to the young woman who is still kneeling before him. “Your sins,” he says, “are forgiven. . . . Your faith has saved you; go in peace.” And she does.

The guests begin to murmur, saying to each other, “Who is this who even forgives sins?”

Afterward, Simon wonders the same. Though he tells himself he is in the right, he feels off kilter, as though the ground has suddenly shifted beneath his feet. His lips tremble slightly and a small tear runs down his cheek. Working hard to control himself, he can’t quite manage it, can’t stop asking, “Who is this man who offers to forgive sins? Can he forgive my sins?”¹

THE TIMES

This woman's story took place between the years AD 26 and 30.

Her story is told in Luke 7:36–50.

In the Middle East, hospitality has always been considered a sacred responsibility. To refrain from caring for guests would have been considered a grievous offense.

Mealtimes were often leisurely, especially if guests were being entertained. To eat with someone meant that you enjoyed a good relationship, that there was peace between you. It was the host's responsibility not only to care for his guests but to protect them from harm, even to the point of defending them with his life should that be necessary. This is why so many religious people were scandalized by the meals Jesus shared with notorious sinners.

Instead of sitting down at a table as we do today, people either sat on mats on the floor or reclined on couches. At least one scholar² thinks that Jesus and his disciples were reclining on mats or cushions on the floor rather than on elevated couches when they ate their last meal together before his death. For formal dinners, guests sometimes reclined on a *triclinium*, a seating area made up of couches arranged in the form of a *U*. The food would be served on a removable platter that served as the tabletop for a three-legged table. Rather than using silverware, people simply tore off a piece of bread and used it to scoop food from a common bowl.

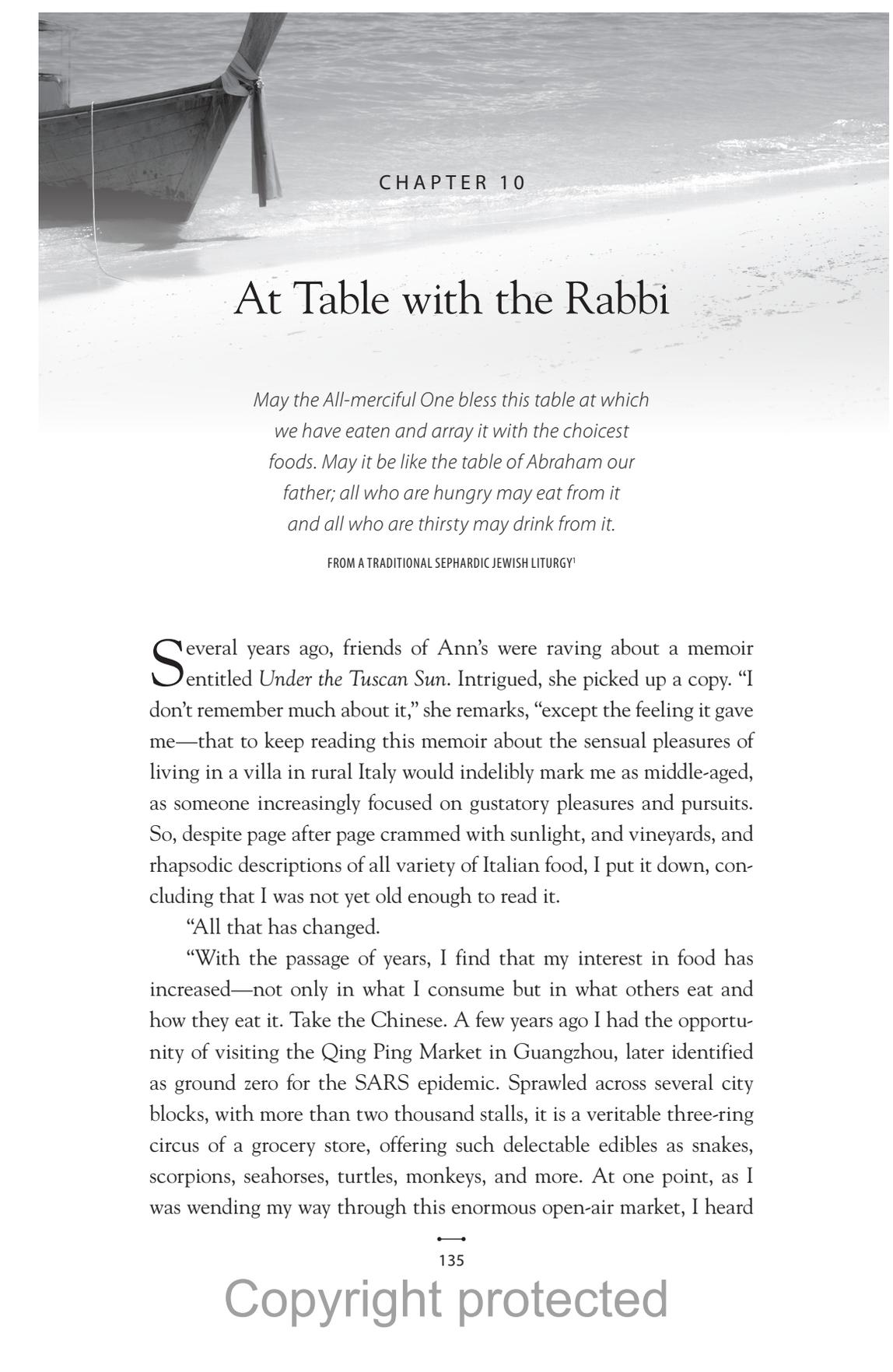
With this as the backdrop, the story comes into clearer focus. Not only did Simon refrain from offering the usual kiss as Jesus entered his home, but he withheld common courtesies, like providing water and olive oil for Jesus to wash his hands and feet. By

not offering these amenities, especially to a rabbi, Simon delivered a stinging, public insult.

But what was a prostitute doing at the house of a Pharisee, a man who would have considered her unfit for his table? To show one's magnanimity, it was common practice to invite outcasts to a formal meal. But these unfortunates were only allowed to eat once all the other guests had completed the meal. Rather than crashing the party, this woman may have humbled herself by identifying with outcasts, thus exposing herself to ridicule because of her desire to thank Jesus for everything he'd done for her.

THE TAKEAWAY

1. Comment on the role reversal that takes place in this story with a “law breaker” becoming the hero while a “law keeper” seems to be the villain.
2. What does this woman's story say about the human tendency to judge others by outward appearances?
3. As you think about the story, take a moment to consider which of the characters you identify with the most. What makes you identify with that person?
4. Have you ever loved someone so much that you didn't care what other people thought? What might your relationship with Christ look like if you loved him that much?
5. Jesus says those who've been forgiven much love much. Take a moment to consider whether there are sins you haven't yet admitted, perhaps even to yourself. Let this woman's story encourage you to tell God everything that is in your heart.



CHAPTER 10

At Table with the Rabbi

*May the All-merciful One bless this table at which
we have eaten and array it with the choicest
foods. May it be like the table of Abraham our
father; all who are hungry may eat from it
and all who are thirsty may drink from it.*

FROM A TRADITIONAL SEPHARDIC JEWISH LITURGY¹

Several years ago, friends of Ann's were raving about a memoir entitled *Under the Tuscan Sun*. Intrigued, she picked up a copy. "I don't remember much about it," she remarks, "except the feeling it gave me—that to keep reading this memoir about the sensual pleasures of living in a villa in rural Italy would indelibly mark me as middle-aged, as someone increasingly focused on gustatory pleasures and pursuits. So, despite page after page crammed with sunlight, and vineyards, and rhapsodic descriptions of all variety of Italian food, I put it down, concluding that I was not yet old enough to read it.

"All that has changed.

"With the passage of years, I find that my interest in food has increased—not only in what I consume but in what others eat and how they eat it. Take the Chinese. A few years ago I had the opportunity of visiting the Qing Ping Market in Guangzhou, later identified as ground zero for the SARS epidemic. Sprawled across several city blocks, with more than two thousand stalls, it is a veritable three-ring circus of a grocery store, offering such delectable edibles as snakes, scorpions, seahorses, turtles, monkeys, and more. At one point, as I was wending my way through this enormous open-air market, I heard

a small cat meowing. The poor creature was dangling in a mesh bag, slung over the arm of a shopper in front of me. I wanted desperately to believe that he was being toted home to become the family pet.

“My visit to the market confirmed the Chinese saying that tables and chairs are the only four-legged things that the people of this region won’t eat, and the Cantonese saying that ‘anything that walks, swims, crawls, or flies with its back to heaven is edible.’ It also explained why I hadn’t seen even a single bird flying over this city of six million people during my visit. At least, I concluded, the people in this region would probably never starve. How could they when they knew how to eat everything imaginable—and unimaginable!

“What a contrast to the Jewish approach to food, with its strict dietary laws and ritual meals. I could not think of two more opposite ways of looking at food.”

J. R. R. Tolkien, author of *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy, wrote that “if more of us valued food and cheer and song above hoarded gold, it would be a merrier world.”² Certainly the Jewish people developed a rich understanding of the place of food in daily life. During the time of Jesus, special meals had already long been part of the cycle of biblical feasts. Many biblical scenes in both the Old and New Testaments take place around meals.

Also, hospitality in this region of the world was considered a sacred obligation. One of the earliest instances of hospitality recorded in the Bible is the one in which Abraham welcomed three complete strangers by immediately killing a fattened calf and then laying out a sumptuous meal (Genesis 18:6–7). Jesus himself was no stranger to hospitality. Think of how often the Gospels portray him as a guest at feasts and banquets. Though his disciples left everything behind to follow him, they certainly must have enjoyed plenty of good meals along the way.

Jesus often told parables about banquets, weaving stories about guests who refused a dinner invitation, who didn’t dress appropriately for a banquet, or who chose the wrong seat at the table. Using the meal itself to teach a lesson, he usually told such parables at the table.

Come to think of it, some of his last, most cherished words were

uttered at the meal he shared with his disciples the night before his death. How can hearing Jesus's words within their cultural and historical setting give new meaning to the way we live and worship today?

Ancient Hospitality

A visit to Israel will quickly convince you that hospitality in this ancient land must often have been a matter of life and death. Imagine taking a short hike in the middle of the day in summer. It's ninety degrees in the shade—but there is no shade, only an endless rocky landscape dotted by a few scraggly shrubs. Now imagine that you can't climb into an air-conditioned car to get out of the searing heat. Nor can you reach for an ice-cold bottle of water to slake your thirst because grocery stores from which to purchase bottled water haven't yet been invented. Not only that, but the road on which you are walking is frequented by robbers who make their living off vulnerable travelers. But, thank God, there is something in this rugged country that works in your favor. It is hospitality. You can approach any of the residents of this ancient land for food, water, and shelter, and they will gladly provide it.

This same kind of “extreme hospitality” has been the practice around the Middle East and much of Africa for thousands of years. A few years ago when Lois traveled to Uganda with friends, hospitality greeted them at every turn. Whether visiting simple concrete homes, humble congregations, or dirt-floored schools, they were offered the best available food, which might only be bananas, boiled eggs, peanuts, or a bottle of soda. More than once their hosts told their children to run outside and catch dinner. Darting away, the children would return holding a prized chicken that moments earlier had been roaming about in the yard. A feast of roast chicken, plantains, yams, pineapple, and papaya would ensue. Everywhere they went, they feasted, even though at times they were the only ones eating because of the scarcity of food.

When they expressed their awe (and discomfort) at the generosity of their hosts, their African friends explained that hospitality is so highly valued in their culture that they could not possibly consider

withholding it. They later discovered that many east Africans end up impoverishing themselves after hosting lavish family celebrations and festive meals. Still, because of the generosity of their African friends, Lois and her friends had the chance to taste the kind of hospitality practiced in Eastern cultures from biblical times until today.

Understanding such customs sheds light on a familiar scene from the Gospels. When Jesus commissioned his disciples to preach in the surrounding villages, he gave them instructions that sound radical to us: “Take nothing for the journey except a staff—no bread, no bag, no money in your belts . . . And if any place will not welcome you or listen to you, leave that place and shake the dust off your feet as a testimony against them” (Mark 6:8, 11). Taking this passage literally, some Christians have gone with little or no money to places that don’t have the same high regard for hospitality that existed in Jesus’s day. And even though God can provide for them, it seems clear that Jesus wasn’t asking his disciples to count on daily miracles to sustain them. Instead, he knew that the *talmidim* of an esteemed rabbi would normally be warmly welcomed. Any community that failed to treat his disciples with honor deserved to be left behind.

In a land without police, social welfare, or insurance agencies to provide for people, mutual dependence was vital to survival. Community was essential, and it was celebrated at mealtime when the whole family gathered together at the end of the day. (A smaller meal, more like a snack, was eaten in the morning.) The main meal took a team of people hours to prepare—collecting wood, hauling water, grinding grain, kneading dough, chopping vegetables, stoking a fire, and stirring the pot.

Imagine for a moment what mealtimes would have been like. When we think of sitting down to dinner, we picture chairs arranged around a dining room table, set with individual plates and silverware. With this image in mind, it’s difficult to understand how Jesus and his disciples could have reclined at table. It sounds awkward and uncomfortable.³

But ancient people would not have been sitting around the kind of tables that populate our dining rooms because, first of all, they wouldn’t

have had dining rooms. Neither would they have had large, four-legged tables, which were only found in palaces.⁴ During mealtimes, people sat on mats on the floor of a tent or dwelling, and platters or bowls of food were placed in the middle. In New Testament times, they reclined on couches at more formal meals, and food was placed on small three-legged tables with a removable platter for a top.

Neither did people have silverware. Instead, they simply tore a piece of bread from a common loaf, and then dipped it into the same bowl of stew as everyone else. As for the cooking, it was done outside.

When Lois told her Ugandan friends about how biblical meals were eaten, they laughed and said, “Africans still eat the same way.”

Though the Israelites didn’t have fancy tables or place settings, they had something better. For them, the table was much more than a place to eat. It was a place of mutual trust and vulnerability. Sitting down at the same table with someone meant that you shared a protected relationship with them. Whom you ate with revealed something important about who you were, showing to whom you belonged.

Just as the word “house” could mean your family lineage or the word “bed” could mean your most intimate relationship, the word “table” could stand for family and friends—all those you trusted and on whom you depended. These were the people with whom you enjoyed table fellowship.⁵ In fact, table fellowship implied a nearly inviolable relationship. To be a guest at a family’s table meant that you were under their protection. As long as you were with the family, they were honor-bound to defend you, even at the cost of their lives.⁶

This approach to hospitality and table fellowship is still honored in some parts of the world. Several years ago, Lois was part of a group that visited a Bedouin family living in the Negev desert, in southern Israel. As they approached, a young boy wearing a *keffiyeh* (an Arab headdress) came riding toward them on his donkey in order to escort them to his goat-hair tent. As they entered, the adults inside welcomed them warmly, motioning for them to sit on the floor. They were served sweet tea, unleavened bread, and coffee roasted with cardamom and boiled over a fire. When it came time to leave, the boy mounted his

little donkey once again and rode in front of their bus as it wended its way up the desert road. His presence at their arrival and departure symbolized the family's pledge to protect their guests as long as they were in their territory.

Now try reading the Bible in light of what you have just learned about hospitality and table fellowship.⁷ Listen to David's words in Psalm 23:

Even though I walk
 through the darkest valley,
 I will fear no evil,
 for you are with me;
 your rod and your staff,
 they comfort me.
 You prepare a table before me
 in the presence of my enemies.
 You anoint my head with oil;
 my cup overflows.

The psalm takes on new depth as you realize what David was saying—that even in the most dangerous of circumstances, when enemies lay in wait, he knew he was safe in God's presence. Like a divine host, God was sheltering and protecting him, inviting him to eat at his own table.

How much better life would be if at every moment we shared David's conviction—that even when we feel as if we are alone, walking through a wilderness of some kind, God is with us. When illness, suffering, loss, or anxiety assails us, that is precisely when God offers the protective, sheltering hospitality of his table to nourish and sustain us.

Having Dinner with God

Knowing about ancient biblical traditions of table fellowship sheds light on many other biblical scenes, in both Old and New Testaments. One of the most remarkable dinners in all of Scripture may be one you

haven't even heard of. It happened on a mountaintop, thousands of years ago, just after Moses and the people of Israel received the covenant on Mount Sinai.

Before describing the scene, let's take a moment to consider the importance of covenants in the Eastern world. A covenant was much more than a mere business agreement. It signified that a deep relationship existed between all parties to the covenant, bonding people together in friendship, almost like a marriage. When a covenant was made, it was celebrated with a ceremonial meal that represented the peace and mutual acceptance that now existed by virtue of the covenant.

Now let's look at what happened at that ancient feast on Sinai. The covenant between God and his people had just been confirmed. Here's how Exodus 24:9–11 describes the scene:

Moses and Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, and the seventy elders of Israel went up and saw the God of Israel . . . God did not raise his hand against these leaders of the Israelites; they saw God, and they ate and drank.

Why does the Bible make a point of saying that the elders “saw the God of Israel,” noting that God didn't raise his hand against them? Elsewhere the Bible says that no one can see God and live.⁸ And yet this scene depicts the leading men of Israel happily eating and drinking in his presence. Like a Middle Eastern host protecting his guests from harm, God had invited them to a ceremonial meal celebrating their covenant with him. Before anything had been done to break it, they had perfect fellowship with God. Moses and the elders sat down at his heavenly table to dine as his close “family,” eating and drinking in his presence, without any negative consequences.

This same idea appears to be woven into the Passover meal in Egypt. The Israelites had asked Pharaoh to let them travel outside of Egypt so that they could worship their God. But when Pharaoh forbade them, they worshipped right in the midst of their enemies. The Israelites sacrificed a lamb for their Passover meal and were kept safe

from the angel of death while the firstborn of the Egyptians were slain. God's presence at the "table" brought his people protection and their enemies judgment.

This idea of communing with God at his table was a key part of the sacrificial system of the temple. Certain offerings, like the sin and guilt sacrifices, were completely consecrated to God. But others, like the fellowship or peace (*shelem*) offering, were different. In these kinds of offerings, the worshipper and his family, along with the priests, would consume a portion of the sacrifice. When they ate from the altar, it was as if God was sharing some of *his* food with them. By doing so they were affirming that they were dining at God's table. Through the *shelem* offering, they celebrated their *shalom* with God and with each other. The Israelites understood this as true covenantal communion—that they could sit down to a meal with God.

Note that the Passover meal was communal—one lamb could easily feed fifteen people, and none of the meat could be left for another day. Such a meal signified that a state of peace existed between you and God, and between you and everyone present. Perhaps this is also why Jesus told his followers to be reconciled to their brothers and sisters before offering their gifts at the altar. With this in mind, the post–New Testament church forbade members who were quarreling with each other to take part in the Eucharist until they were reconciled. To do otherwise would be to "pollute their sacrifice."⁹

Communion services today are celebrated in a variety of ways within the church throughout the world. Regardless of how our own church understands this act of worship, our faith can be enriched by a deeper understanding of its biblical roots. The next time you receive Communion, take time to reflect on what you've learned about table fellowship, celebrating the peace you enjoy with God and with other believers. If there are any unresolved issues in any of your relationships, especially with other believers, make an effort to work through them before receiving Communion again.

Most of us have probably heard stories of people disagreeing about Communion practices, like the man who argues constantly for a

common cup rather than individual glasses, or the elder who is upset that people go up to the sanctuary to receive Communion rather than staying seated. How ironic that Communion, a powerful celebration of our bond with God and other believers, should become a source of division rather than peace!

Table fellowship with God was not restricted to the temple. It was also celebrated in the home. Even now in traditional Jewish homes, the dinner table is considered the family altar, and the home itself is called the *mikdash meyat*, a little sanctuary where God can dwell. Because the family invites God to join them at every meal, all foods must be ritually acceptable. Within the home, the mother and father function as priests, bearing witness of God's presence to their children.

Shabbat Dinner

Nowadays we tend to think of meals merely as times for refueling our bodies. Breakfast is an Egg McMuffin behind the steering wheel, lunch is a vending machine candy bar at our desk, and dinner is a Lean Cuisine entrée in front of the evening news. In our rush-rush world many of us dine alone or while doing something else. Of course we still have our celebrations with family and friends, but the habit of leisurely family mealtimes has almost become extinct. We've lost the close tie that for centuries has existed between food and community. Maybe it's time for us to restore this dimension to our daily lives, sitting down together in order to celebrate our relationship with God and others.

One way to do this is to look closely at the Jewish tradition of the Shabbat evening meal.¹⁰ In an observant Jewish family, Friday mornings are often jammed with housecleaning and cooking. At sunset on Friday (the beginning of the new day) all work ends as the family sits down for dinner. The last act of "work" that can be done on Friday is the lighting of two candles to begin the dinner. Along with a cup of wine, two loaves of beautifully braided *challah*¹¹ are placed on the table. Lighting the candles, the mother waves her hand over them as

though welcoming the Shabbat. Then she covers her eyes and intones this prayer:

*Barukh atah Adonai, Eloheinu, melekh ha'olam,
asher kidishanu b'mitzvotav
v'tzivanu l'hadlik ner shel Shabbat.*

Blessed are you, Lord, our God, King of the universe
who sanctifies us with his commandments,
and commands us to light the lights of Shabbat.

After more prayers, the father removes the napkins covering the two loaves of bread and then lifts them up while reciting this blessing:

*Barukh atah Adonai, Eloheinu, melekh ha'olam,
ha-motzi lechem min ha-aretz.*

Blessed are you, Lord, our God, King of the universe,
who brings forth bread from the earth.

Then he breaks the bread into pieces and passes it around the table. At one point in the evening, the father reads Proverbs 31 to his wife to extol her virtues and then prays for her and blesses her. Then

Lechem

Lechem is the Hebrew word for “bread.” It can also refer to food or nourishment in general.

the father or mother places their lips on the forehead of each child. To a son they recite, “May God make you like Ephraim and Manasseh,” and to a daughter, “May God make you like Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, and Leah.” Then to both, “May

the Lord bless and protect you, may the Lord bestow his favor upon you and give you peace.”¹² Often they follow with a personal prayer and message of encouragement for each child. What a treasured moment for parents and children alike.

Every Jewish meal is supposed to be a time for discussing the Scriptures, but this is especially emphasized on Shabbat. The rabbis said, “When three eat at one table and bring up words of Torah, it is as if they ate from the table of God, blessed be He!”¹³ Perhaps that was

why Jesus was invited to dinner so often—he could always be counted on for a fascinating discussion.

Most people celebrate Shabbat with the best food they can afford. In Jesus's time, fish was commonly served. Those who could afford it would have eaten meat on Shabbat. Wine was usually served only on Shabbat and on some feast days. Today, if a day of fasting falls on the Sabbath, it is delayed.¹⁴ Even mourning is forbidden because the Sabbath is a day of joy.¹⁵

On Shabbat, the candles are often left burning until they go out on their own. The evening becomes a lovely time for enjoying a fine meal and relaxed conversation. Perhaps we should consider adapting these traditions to restore Sunday as a special time of fellowship and rest.¹⁶

A Table of Reconciliation

In addition to serving as a place of worship, the table represented a place of peace in biblical times and in many Eastern cultures today. Parties to a covenant of peace celebrated it with a ritual meal. Afterward, neither party was allowed to bring up the grievance again.

Remember the story of Jacob and his tricky father-in-law, Laban? Jacob had fallen in love with his daughter Rachel, but on their wedding day, at the last moment, Laban substituted his older and less attractive daughter, Leah. The hapless Jacob did not discover the switch until the next morning. At that point Laban gave him Rachel to be his second wife, but not until he got Jacob to promise seven more years of labor beyond the seven he had already worked for Leah.

Fed up with Laban's shenanigans and having fulfilled his part of the bargain, Jacob finally fled with his two wives, his flocks, and his children. Ten days later, when Laban finally caught up with him, the two made a covenant of peace in which each agreed that neither would harm the other. Then they shared a meal. Here's how Genesis describes it:

[Jacob] offered a sacrifice there in the hill country and invited his relatives to a meal. After they had eaten, they spent the night there.

Early the next morning Laban kissed his grandchildren and his daughters and blessed them. Then he left and returned home.
(Genesis 31:54–55)

By eating together Jacob and Laban were proclaiming that their relationship had been restored. Because the meal was also part of a sacrifice to God, it was understood that the Lord himself was present at the table, partaking of the meal and witnessing their vows. The shared meal signified that Jacob and Laban were at peace with God and with each other.

Such meals still occur. A few years ago a messianic Jew by the name of Ilan Zamir was driving through an Arab village in Israel. Suddenly, a figure darted out from the side of the road. Ilan slammed

Sulha

A *sulha* is a covenantal meal of reconciliation used in Arab cultures. The word *sulha* is the Arabic equivalent of the Hebrew word *shulhan*, which means “table.” This practice derives from the ancient belief that eating at the same table with others is the essence of a peaceful, harmonious relationship.

on his brakes—too late. He had struck and killed a thirteen-year-old Palestinian boy. Ilan couldn’t understand why the teenager had ignored the blaring horn and the screeching brakes. Later he learned the reason. The boy was deaf.

Haunted by the tragedy, Ilan was determined to make amends by seeking the family’s forgiveness. Other Jews who heard of his plan thought he was crazy. An Israeli policeman even warned him, saying: “Man, that’s dangerous what you want to do. You can get into serious trouble. You’re an Israeli Jew and these people you want to meet are Arabs on the West Bank.”¹⁷

The policeman was merely echoing what Ilan already knew. According to Arab tradition, the family could kill Ilan as vengeance for their son’s death. But Ilan persisted, enlisting an Arab pastor who suggested he arrange for a *sulha*, a meal of reconciliation.

Here’s how Ilan describes what happened when he sat down with the boy’s family for the ceremonial meal:

The cups of coffee remained on the table, untouched. According to tradition, the father would be the first to taste from the cup as a sign that he accepted the reconciliation gesture, and had indeed agreed to forgive. The tension in his face had cast a shadow on the proceedings until then, but at that point, he suddenly began to smile. The lines of grief softened. He looked at me squarely and his smile broadened as he moved toward me, opening his arms in a gesture of embrace. As we met and embraced, he kissed me ceremonially three times on the cheeks. Everyone began to shake hands with one another as the father sipped coffee. The whole atmosphere was transformed, the tension at an end.

But then something even more surprising happened. A spokesman for the family turned to Ilan with this remarkable invitation:

Know, O my brother, that you are in place of this son who has died. You have a family and a home somewhere else, but know that here is your second home.

What a picture of reconciliation! A Palestinian family inviting an Israeli Jew into their own family! Come to think of it, this is a striking picture of the way God welcomes us into his family through the death of his Son, inviting us to sit down at his table and partake of the covenant meal.

This practice of eating a meal together as a sign of forgiveness and peace runs from the Old Testament through the New Testament. Remember Jesus's parable of the prodigal son as he is welcomed home by his father, who promptly throws a party to mark his return? Again, the picture is of a festive meal to mark the reconciliation between father and son. The father is ecstatic because his son has rejoined the family.

Wonderful as this story sounds to modern ears, it is even more remarkable than we might imagine. Scholar Kenneth Bailey has asked people all over the Middle East what it would mean if a son were to ask for his inheritance while the father was still alive. The response is universal shock about how unthinkable the request is, because it implies a wish that the father was dead!¹⁸ Jesus's story must have offended and

shocked many of his listeners because no Middle Eastern father would have been expected to forgive the offense of such a son.

Understanding the story in this light can help us perceive how shocking God's acceptance of us really is. We tend to think of sin as an infraction of rules. But the story Jesus tells makes it clear that our sin is not just an infraction of a set of laws but a terrible offense against God, our loving Father. By taking the good gifts we've been given—our time, money, and talents—and running away to live life our own way, we are acting like the prodigal who turns his back on his father, sells the ancestral lands, and then squanders his inheritance.¹⁹ It is tantamount to wishing God were dead.

Western Christians often describe salvation as a transaction—that we have sinned by breaking God's rules. If we believe in Christ, he will pay the penalty, allowing us to escape punishment for sin when we die. Though there's truth in this explanation, there's so much more to the story. If we reduce salvation to a kind of deal that we make with God, a plea bargain with the Almighty, we run the risk of painting him as an angry judge or an exasperated policeman whose primary purpose is to punish sin. Jesus's parable reveals how shockingly large God's love for us is, for he acts as no self-respecting Middle Eastern father would have, welcoming us with delight back to the family table.

Jesus's story of the prodigal son and the forgiving father also highlights the fact that salvation is not just about our life in heaven but about our relationship with God on earth. By healing our alienation, God enables us to have ongoing daily intimacy with him. Each time we take Communion, we celebrate what Jesus has done for us, enabling us to "sit down to dinner" with God even in this life, which is something that was not possible before.

Dining in Jesus's Day

Some people were offended not only by the stories Jesus told but by the dinner invitations he accepted. They even accused him of being "a glutton and a drunkard." Unable to forgive his promiscuous table

fellowship, they could not imagine how any self-respecting rabbi could party with such low-class people! They didn't realize, as Joachim Jeremias has pointed out, that Jesus was living out his own parable, playing the role of the forgiving father welcoming home the prodigal. That's why he welcomed the wayward and ate with tax collectors and sinners.

Jeremias notes that in the East, even today, to invite someone to a meal was to extend an honor, an offering of peace, trust, and forgiveness. Jesus's meals with sinners weren't merely social events or just signs of his empathy for the lowly, though he was compassionate. They represented the very essence of his mission and message. Jeremias points out, "The inclusion of sinners in the community of salvation, achieved in table-fellowship, is the most meaningful expression of the message of the redeeming love of God."²⁰ Each time Jesus ate with sinners, he was revealing the kingdom of God.

We see these mealtime gatherings at so many key moments in Jesus's ministry. Remember the morning after the resurrection, when Jesus fries up some fish for his disciples for breakfast (John 21:9–19)? Usually depicted as a guest at someone else's table, Jesus now acts as the host, serving his disciples breakfast on the shores of Galilee.

Significantly, the topic of conversation at this meal is Jesus's relationship with Peter. After Jesus's arrest, Peter had betrayed him three times. Now, Jesus asks Peter three times whether he loves him. When Peter answers in the affirmative, Jesus reinstates him as his disciple. The meal beside the sea demonstrates the reconciliation going on between Jesus and Peter. After deserting Jesus and witnessing his agonizing death, how deeply healing it must have been for Peter to dine with his beloved master once again.

The meal of reconciliation also appears in Revelation 3:20. Listen to the familiar promise: "Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with that person, and they with me." Have you ever wondered why the Lord talks about dining with us? He is inviting us into an intimate relationship that is to be celebrated by a meal together.

The Banquet of the Messiah

Now you can see why Jesus, at their last supper prior to his death, told his disciples to remember him by enjoying a meal together. The bread and the wine would remind them that his sacrifice made it possible for them to have unbroken communion with God and with each other.

Many groups in Jesus's day had strict rules governing table fellowship. Pharisees would only eat with *haverim* ("friends" who observed their strict rules). Essenes, who would only dine with other Essenes, had purity laws that made the Pharisees look lax by comparison. The early church, however, took the opposite approach, adopting the attitude Jesus had modeled. In fact, their table fellowship quickly expanded to include Gentiles. To many, the idea that God would invite Jewish and Gentile believers in Christ to eat together at his table was shocking. It showed a grace and love beyond comprehension.

The early Christians were beginning to live out the fulfillment of the ancient promise spoken in Isaiah:

On this mountain the LORD Almighty will prepare
 a feast of rich food for all peoples,
 a banquet of aged wine—
 the best of meats and the finest of wines.
 On this mountain he will destroy
 the shroud that enfolds all peoples,
 the sheet that covers all nations;
 he will swallow up death forever.
 The Sovereign LORD will wipe away the tears
 from all faces;
 he will remove his people's disgrace
 from all the earth.
 The LORD has spoken. (Isaiah 25:6–8)

Once again, like the sacred gathering of the elders on Mount Sinai, Scripture depicts a meal on a mountaintop. But this time it is

the meal to end all meals, the greatest of all banquets, to be held at the end of time. Not only will it be safe for human beings to feast in God's presence; no one invited to the meal will ever have to come down from the mountaintop. Instead, we will dwell with God forever. Furthermore, the guest list will include more than just the elders of Israel. Everyone who belongs to God will come to celebrate the feast!

No wonder the New Testament pictures heaven as a wedding feast—the celebration of the union of the Lamb of God with his people. In the meantime, every time we celebrate Communion, not only can we enjoy unbroken fellowship with God and others, we can also get a tiny foretaste of the feast to come.



The ancient biblical traditions of table fellowship are rich and beautiful, offering profound insights into our own relationship with God. But there are other customs, like tying tassels to your garments, that seem odd, even legalistic. Why did the Jews of Jesus's day wear tassels? And if Jesus wore them, why don't we? Let's explore this unusual custom to see what light it might shed on our own faith.

AT THE FEET OF THE RABBI

1. In Matthew 25:35, Jesus said, "I was a stranger and you invited me in." He expected his followers to show hospitality to others. How good are you at this? Ask the Lord to give you an opportunity to invite someone for a meal, or even just coffee or soda.
2. If you've had a falling out with someone, or perhaps if your children have had a fight, try having a *sulha*—a meal of reconciliation. Have a ceremony of apology and then a special

meal. Once you take the first bite, the offense can never be brought up again!

3. What if families apologized for their sins to each other before Communion at church? Then the Communion would become the *sulha*. Everyone would walk out with a clean slate for the new week.
4. Make it a regular practice to enjoy a special meal with family and friends on Saturday night or Sunday afternoon. Place a candle on the table. You might even keep it burning until you go to bed on Sunday night (as long as it's in a safe container). Consider purchasing or baking fresh bread for the occasion. Make the meal leisurely and be sure to discuss a Scripture passage at the table. Before you close the meal, pray a blessing over each child in attendance.

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CHALLAH

Makes two loaves.

- 2½ cups warm water
- 1 tablespoon active dry yeast
- ½ cup honey
- 4 tablespoons vegetable oil
- 3 eggs
- 1 tablespoon salt
- 8 cups unbleached all-purpose flour

1. In a large bowl, sprinkle yeast over barely warm water. Beat in honey, oil, 2 eggs, and salt. Add the flour one cup at a time, beating after each addition. As dough thickens, begin kneading until it is smooth and elastic and not sticky. Add flour as needed. Cover with a damp clean cloth and let rise for 1½ hours or until dough has

doubled in bulk.

2. Punch down the risen dough and turn it onto a floured board. Divide in half and knead each half for five minutes, adding flour as needed to keep it from getting sticky. Divide each half into thirds and roll into long snake about 1½ inches in diameter. Pinch the ends of the three snakes together firmly and braid from middle. Leave as braid or form into a round braided loaf by bringing ends together, curving the braid into a circle and then pinching the ends together. Grease two baking trays and place a finished braid on each. Cover with towel and let rise about one hour.
3. Preheat oven to 375 degrees F (190 degrees C).
4. Beat the remaining egg and brush a generous amount over each braid. Sprinkle with poppy seeds if desired.
5. Bake at 375 degrees F (190 degrees C) for about 40 minutes. Bread should have a nice hollow sound when thumped on the bottom. Cool on a rack at least one hour prior to serving.