

The Eucharist in the Bible

To truly take the time to study the Bible, we can come to understand how what is revealed in the Old Testament, is fulfilled in the New Testament. From the very beginning of scripture, God reveals Himself to us and sets us apart from all of creation to be like Him. But when Adam and Eve fall to sin in the eating of the fruit of the tree of Good and Evil, God puts a plan in motion to save us from our sin, by the eating of the body and blood of his Son. We find throughout the pages of the Old Testament the plan revealed in subtle ways in prophesy. There are pre-figures of Christ in the images of Cain and Able, and the sacrifice of Abram and Isaac on the mountain. We see the offering of bread and wine by the high priest, Melchizedek. To say that "Eucharist" exists in the Bible is not a simple thing. The breadth and width of what the Eucharist is continues to be a mystery of God's love, but we know that God wants us, His people, to share in it together until Christ comes again.

The word "Eucharist" meaning "thanksgiving" does not exist in scripture as a noun. Instead, we can find it used as a verb in the Gospel of Luke when we look at the Greek text. The word "Eucharistēsas" is used when Jesus is instituting the Eucharist when he says, "And he took 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.'" Luke 22:19.

After the death and resurrection of Jesus, the early Christians would gather to celebrate the early form of what we know today as the Mass, although they didn't refer to the Eucharist as we do today. They used other terms. St. Paul can be seen admonishing the people in his first letter to the Corinthians as he refers to the Lord's Supper. He says, "When you meet together, it is not the **Lord's supper** that you eat. For in eating, each one goes ahead with his own meal, and one is hungry and another is drunk. What! Do you not have houses to eat and drink in?" 1 Corinthians 11:20-22

But perhaps the earliest name for the Eucharist is the **Breaking of Bread**. This occurs in the Acts of the Apostles following Pentecost. After the Holy Spirit descended on the Apostles, they went out into the street and St. Peter gave a very inspiring speech to the people. As a result, we are told, "So those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls. And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the **breaking of bread** and the prayers." Act 2:41-42

Another word used for the Eucharist in the New Testament is "Memorial," the words used at the institution of the Eucharist by Christ. "And he took 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.'" Luke 22:19 The Eucharist is a memorial that not only helps us to remember what he did two thousand years ago, but also makes present the actions of Christ to us today.

The most common reference to the Eucharist we use today is "Holy Communion." This is what we teach young Catholics from their earliest days. We find reference to the term Communion when we look at the Greek translation of St. Paul's first letter to the Corinthians when he says, "The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not a participation (in Greek, Koinonia) in the blood of Christ?" The word Communion comes from the Greek "Koinonia" or to participate together. That is what we all do when we approach the altar and receive the Eucharist."

In order to understand all of these references to the Eucharist and the deeper meaning behind it, we need to look to Christ himself who gave us his body and blood as the Eucharist. In the sixth chapter of the Gospel of John, Jesus tells us in plain speech in the Bread of Life Discourse that there are two things that we need to do in order to have eternal life. He prefaces both of these with the statement, "I am the bread of life." First he tells the people that they need to believe in him. Jesus said to them, "I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me will never hunger, and whoever believes in me will never thirst." John 6:35

In the second part of his discourse, Jesus goes on to tell the people, "I am the bread of life. Your ancestors ate the manna in the desert, but they died; this is the bread that comes down from heaven so that one may eat it and not die. I am the living bread that came down from heaven; whoever eats this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give is my flesh for the life of the world." John 6:48-51

Jesus emphasized the necessity of believing that he is come from heaven; believing in his divinity, and he also emphasized that we need to eat his flesh and drink his blood. We need to do both. Even when people turned and walked away when they couldn't stand the thought of what he was saying, Jesus did not back down from his words. He stood his ground with his teaching, and today we understand that Jesus absolutely meant what he said. While this seems hard to comprehend for someone new to the faith, we only have to look at the last supper to see that Jesus fulfilled what he said about eating his body and drinking his blood when he instituted the Eucharist. In Luke we read, "Then he took a cup, gave thanks, and said, 'Take this and share it among yourselves; for I tell you [that] from this time on I shall not drink of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes.' Then he took the bread, said the blessing, broke it, and gave it to them, saying, 'This is my body, which will be given for you; do this in memory of me.' And likewise the cup after they had eaten, saying, 'This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which will be shed for you.'" Lk 22:17-20

Here we see that as he gives thanks (Eucharist), he gives us his body and blood to eat fulfilling the Bread of Life Discourse. In the form of bread and wine we recall that he is the bread come down from heaven. In the breaking of the bread he gives it to his Apostles, and to us. He commissions us to do this in memory, or memorial of him. All these things are the Eucharist.

Again, the Eucharist in all of its fullness is a mystery of the Love of God. We need to learn to appreciate it and understand it from many different perspectives. But ultimately we need to remember that the Eucharist is Christ Jesus himself, blessed, broken and given to us so that we may have eternal life with him.