FELLOWSHIP STUDIES
A monthly study on the Jewish roots of Christianity

International Fellowship of Christians and Jews®



Gathering Around the Table

For many of us, some of our fondest memories are made around a table. In many homes, the family table is the centerpiece, the place where we gather to be nourished and nurtured, to be heard and to share stories, to celebrate and commiserate, and to simply enjoy being together.

The table serves a purpose much greater than simply a space on which to serve our food. It is a powerful symbol of community, unity, and fellowship for people of faith.

When we use our tables for godly purposes, the act of eating and gathering around the table has the ability to bring us closer to God.

This Fellowship Study is all about the holy power and potential of the table. Sharing our table with others is an important way to show kindness and generosity. And through our shared meals, we can foster fellowship with one another. This is not just a Jewish tradition; the early Christians *"broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts"* (Acts 2:46).

Even a simple meal can become an experience that moves us further on our walk with God. In Psalm 23:1 King David wrote: *"The Lord is my shepherd, I lack nothing."* David then went on to say, *"You prepare a table before me ... my cup overflows."* Every time God "prepares a table" for us, it is an opportunity to recognize His goodness and blessings. It can increase our awareness of God in our lives. In this way, our home becomes a sanctuary, and our table becomes holy.



You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. — PSALM 23:5

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A Place of Grace

The Bible directs us to feed the hungry and help the needy. Proverbs 22:9 assures us that *"The generous will themselves be blessed, for they share their food with the poor"* and Isaiah 58:7 instructs us that a true fast pleasing to the Lord is *"to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter."*

No other item better symbolizes the act of providing hospitality to those in need than the table, where we feed our bodies and nourish our souls. The table is a place of nurturing, of giving and receiving, of kindness. When we invite others to join us, we bring them into our lives, and hopefully, touch their lives.

In the very first verse of Genesis 18, we find Abraham in communion with God as he sat outside his tent. But when Abraham saw three men approaching, he immediately ran to greet them, offering them food and water. Here we learn that by inviting guests into our homes, we take God's Word and transform it into action. We find this concept echoed in the Christian Bible. The author of the Book of Hebrews harkened back to Abraham: *"Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it"* (13:2).

The Hebrew word for table is *shulchan*. Taken apart to form two separate words, we read *"shel chen,"* which means "of grace." Indeed the table is a place of grace – a place where we are blessed and where we bless others. As we share our food, our warmth, and a welcoming atmosphere, we receive God's blessings.

The Jewish sages taught that the word *shulchan* is also an acronym. It stands for the Hebrew phrase: *"Shamur Likevura Chessed Nideevotecha"* which means, "Saved for your burial is the kindness of your generosity." Welcoming guests into our home and serving them a meal at our table blesses us in this life and in the next.

When he wished to display kindness to the offspring of Jonathan, his beloved friend and son of Saul, King David found Mephibosheth, a disabled man whose prestige had long been forgotten. King David could find no better way to bestow everlasting kindness on the son of Jonathan than to give him a permanent seat at the king's table, vowing, *"You will always eat at my table."*

Our tables are far more than just a piece of furniture — they are a vehicle for kindness and grace, a place where we bless others, and in turn, we are blessed immeasurably.



Photo: Aert de Gelder, c. 1683

"Don't be afraid," David said to him, "for I will surely show you kindness for the sake of your father Jonathan… and you will always eat at my table." — 2 SAMUEL 9:7

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A Vehicle for Holiness



Make a table of acacia wood — two cubits long, a cubit wide and a cubit and a half high. — EXODUS 25:23

Before our tables became a focal point of our service to God, there was a different table that served that function — the table God commanded the Israelites to make for the Tabernacle and Holy Temple. Like our tables at home, this table would be a place to hold bread, which would then nourish the people, in this case, the priests.

The Jewish sages note that three of the main vessels in the Temple — the table, the ark, and the altar — were all made of acacia wood. In Hebrew, the word for acacia is *shittim*. The sages teach that *shittim* is an acronym for *shalom*, *tova, yeshuah,* and *mechila* — peace, goodness, salvation, and forgiveness. These four represent all blessings, and during Temple times, it was through these vessels that all blessings were spread to the world.

Since the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 C.E., our tables have served as the vehicle to bring about those same blessings. When we use our table to carry out God's commands, such as feeding the hungry or welcoming guests, it becomes a place of holiness. Every meal we prepare with love and share with others is an act of lovingkindness.

The table is also where we make those actions holy. Instead of just consuming sustenance, we elevate the act of eating when we thank God by saying grace, as all sustenance is from Him.

The Bible directs us to thank God after we have eaten as well. In Deuteronomy 8:10 we read: *"When you have eaten and are satisfied, praise the Lord your God."* It's one thing to turn to God when we are hungry; it's another to remember God when we are satisfied.

The table is also an ideal place for sharing God's Word. In fact, according to Jewish tradition, every time two people share a meal, a *Torah* (Bible) thought should also be shared. In this way, the table becomes the place where we not only fill our stomachs, but also our souls.

In the Christian Bible, Paul wrote to the church at Corinth, *"So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God"* (1 Corinthians 10:31). Even our eating and drinking should be done in a way that honors God and those around us.

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A Forum for Fellowship

At the heart of Judaism is the Sabbath, and at the heart of the Sabbath (*Shabbat*) is the table. Typically covered in a white tablecloth symbolizing purity, adorned with flowers, set with our best dishes, and aglow with candlelight, the *Shabbat* table creates an ideal atmosphere for friends and families to come together to enjoy good food and good company.

In Psalm 133 we read: *"How good and pleasant it is when God's people live together in unity!"* When translated from the original Hebrew, this verse literally means: "How good and pleasant it is when brethren sit together." Interestingly, the Hebrew word in the verse meaning "sit," *shevet*, שבת, contains the exact Hebrew letters as the Hebrew word for "Sabbath," שבת, *Shabbat*, only the pronunciation is different. In our fast-paced society, the value of sitting together and being together is often overlooked.

The Sabbath is not the only time the table fosters unity and fellowship. Jewish holidays center around festive meals shared at the table. Some holidays emphasize the importance of the table more than others do. For example, when Mordechai instructed the Jewish people to observe the holiday of Purim in the book of Esther, he told the people to *"observe the days as days of feasting and joy and giving presents of food to one another and gifts to the poor"* (9:22).

But perhaps Passover is the observance in which the table plays the most central role of all. When the Israelites were commanded to bring the Passover sacrifice, God specifically directed the people to consume the offering in groups: *"each man is to take a lamb for his family, one for each household. If any household is too small for a whole lamb, they must share one with their nearest neighbor"* (Exodus 12:3-4).

The Passover *seder*, the ritual meal commemorating the events of the Exodus, takes place with family and friends around the table. Set with symbolic foods and ritual objects, the Passover table is the quintessential example of a gathering. And the Christian Bible shows this tradition of gathering around the table as Jesus gathered with his disciples at the *seder* table (Matthew 26:17-30; Mark 14:12-26; Luke 22:7-23).

On the Sabbath, on the holidays, or simply on any given night of the week, the table is our point of connection. It brings us together as families and communities — and together, at the table, we are nurtured, strengthened, encouraged, and inspired.



Photo: Samuel Hirszenberg, 1894

How good and pleasant it is when God's people live together in unity!

— PSALM 133:1

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Think About It

1. **Think of a positive childhood memory that happened around a table.** What was the occasion? How did you feel? How did gathering around the table play a role in making memories that helped shape the person you are today?
2. **How can you use your own table to do more good in the world?** How can your table be an integral part of your service to God?
3. **What can you do at every meal to make the physical experience a more spiritual one?**
4. **How might you extend your table in a figurative sense?** How might you feed the hungry, nourish others, and comfort the lonely even if they are not in your home?
5. **Studies have shown that shared family meals correlate with children who are happier, healthier, and receive better grades in school.** How does that shift your perspective on the power of gathering around the table for family meals?
6. **How can we educate the next generation about the importance and potential of sharing meals with others around a family table?**



Apply It

1. **Invite guests.** Whether it's family, strangers, friends, or those in need, one of the best, most powerful acts of kindness is to invite guests into our home and share a meal at our table. (Job 31:32; Romans 12:13)
2. **Create table traditions.** Establishing traditions helps us seamlessly integrate meaningful moments into our lives. Some examples include saying grace or inviting new guests over once a month. (Deuteronomy 8:10; Matthew 14:19)
3. **Feed the hungry.** We can bring people in need of food to our table, but we can also bring our table to them. We can volunteer in soup kitchens or partner with organizations like The Fellowship that bring food to the poor and needy. (Isaiah 58:7; Luke 3:11)
4. **Make your table holy.** Read from Scripture or share some inspirational Bible teachings at every meals. Expressing gratitude to God for our food and sharing our food with those in need are also ways to transform our table into a place of holiness and godliness. (Psalm 95:2; 1 Timothy 4:4)
5. **Set a beautiful table.** On holidays, or at any meal we choose, we can enhance our tables by setting them with our best table linens, dishes, flowers and candlelight, to make our table feel like a warm and sacred space. (Psalm 29:2; Hebrews 12:14)



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