

ALIVE! BIBLE STUDY
STUDY AND REFLECTION GUIDE FOR SESSION 5
“GATHERING/FEASTING/SHARING/THANKSGIVING
(Deuteronomy 16:13-17 and Acts 2:42-47)

OBJECTIVES:

- To affirm the importance of gathering for thanksgiving and the sharing areas of common history
- To remind us of the importance of inclusion of those who need community during this season of celebration and thanksgiving
- To sensitize us to the need for dietary balance and sensitivity for those with health concerns during meal and activity planning
- To encourage new and tasty ways of preparing favorite foods traditionally served during the holidays

INTRODUCTION:

The holiday season of Thanksgiving, Christmas, and New Year is coming soon. This is a wonderful season of gatherings, traditions, some of the best tasting food on earth as relatives and friends gather and share their favorite recipes. It wouldn't be Thanksgiving dinner without Aunt Lou's peach cobbler and Uncle Bryan's barbecued rib tips. It would be outrageous if Cousin Bee didn't make her famous macaroni and triple cheese casserole. Brother Joe's new bride has promised to make a big pot of her Haitian beans and rice, and Daddy will bring his big cast iron pot of "chittlins" (chitterlings) with a new, unopened bottle of hot sauce. Dee will bring her seven-layer salad, and Bunny will bring her candied yams. Mama will make her baked turkey, always perfectly deep golden brown with a Dutch oven full of cornbread dressing. Geraldine will drape Granddaddy's favorite recliner with a beautiful African pattern fabric and put his Bible in the seat to remind all present of his spirit with us. Family, friends, and the new family from church who just joined will all gather to tell stories and laugh and maybe even cry a little as we remember those who have gone to glory and lament those loved ones who cannot be found to come and be all of us gathered.

The food will taste so good and there will always be enough to take a plate home. All will be too full, too happy to care about our over-indulgence in the traditions that have brought us thus far on our journey. And we will go home thoroughly satiated.

The next morning there will be too many high blood sugar readings, and the inability of some to put their shoes on swollen feet due to the amount of salt in the food. Some of those who gathered will be too sluggish from the over-abundance of food eaten to do much of anything other than to watch a football game on TV and heat up the plates of food they brought from the festivities the day before.



As wonderful as all of the celebrations are, it is also **a season of many stressors. Some of the stress is positive stress** as we prepare for the occasion – there is much work to do as we bring out special dishes and decorations to prepare for family and friends to gather for feasts, remembrances of history together, worshiping in celebration and thanksgiving for all that God has provided for you and yours, and of course, the recalling of the glory of the Christ Child born into humankind as Savior and Lord of all.

Other stressors may not bring celebration and thanksgiving. These stressors often revolve around grief, missing loved ones who will be with you only in spirit this year because they have made their transition from life to everlasting, or who are unable for whatever reason to attend this year. For many, there may be financial burdens, and relationships that have not mended in time to share in the celebrations. **Hospital emergency room staff find themselves tending to people with more stress-related illnesses and serious symptoms that result from the negative stressors and too many poor dietary and liquid refreshment choices than are exhibited in other seasons of the year.**

For this session you will look at **two gatherings of God’s people for special occasions.** The Old Testament, Deuteronomy 16:13-17 pericope/scripture, gives specific instructions regarding the **Festival of Booths** – a joyful gathering to acknowledge with gratitude the provision of a loving God. The New Testament pericope/scripture, Acts 2:42-47, tells of the new joy and sharing found in **the gathering of people who have found new life in Jesus Christ.** **While neither of these scriptures gives guidelines to healthy eating, each does give a healthy mindset to consider for times of the celebration and gatherings of God’s people.**

BACKGROUND: THE FESTIVAL OF TABERNACLES/BOOTHS – Deuteronomy 16: 13-17

The entire Deuteronomy 16 chapter is about the laws governing the festivals of ancient Israel. They are celebrations of the planting and harvesting of crops and caring for the flocks and herds on a land with limited rainfall. **These festivals gave pause for thanksgiving to a God who continued to care for the Israelites, and to gather for relaxation and celebration of the work that was done during the planting, tending, and harvesting seasons. Three specific festivals are mentioned in Deuteronomy:**

- **“The Festival of Unleavened Bread”** (*Deut. 16:1-8*) commemorates the **“Passover”** – the night of eating unleavened bread and the putting of blood on the doorpost to protect the household from the death angel that went to all Egyptian households for the death of the first born male in the house. This festival recalls for the Israelites the beginning of the exodus from Egypt to the Promised Land and God’s protective over that 40 year exodus.
- **“The Feast of Weeks”** (*Deut. 16:9-12*) occurred the **“seven weeks after the first cutting of the early harvest”** (*Lev. 13:15-16*), and was to be **“held on the fiftieth day after the Sabbath following the offering of the first sheaf.”** Thus, the title **“Pentecost”**

(meaning *fiftieth*) was given to commemorate the occasion.¹ As Christians, we associate this festival called Pentecost, not with harvest time, but with the descending of the Holy Spirit upon the apostles in the form of tongues of fire during the time that Israelites from all nations gathered in Jerusalem for the Feast of Weeks or Pentecost.

- **“The Festival of Booths” or “The Feast of Tabernacles”** (*Deut. 16:13-17— This session’s study and reflection text.*) The **Festival of Booths** took place in the agricultural season of year at the end of the harvest time when the grapes for the wine and olive harvests were completed. This festival is also called **Sukkot, Succot, or Sukkos in Hebrew. As in biblical times, this festival is celebrated on the 15th day of the called Sukkot, Succot, or Sukkos. Tishrei (the time varies from late September to late October.** For more information about Sukkot, see: http://www.hebrew4christians.com/Holidays/Fall_Holidays/Sukkot/sukkot.html .
- **Its name developed out of the need for simple shelters made of plant materials such as plant overgrowth or palm leaves, to shield those gathered from the cool night air of late summer for those seven days. It later became tradition to associate these temporary shelters with the ones used by the Israelites during the Exodus from Egypt.**

The three festivals/feasts mentioned above marked the passage of time through the seasons. They further recalled the cycle of the life of the crops and the Israelites’ work and activities from planting, to new life, through death and decay, to the new season, and then the repeat of new life. These were also times of worship and thanksgiving, and times for the whole community to come together for sharing and the renewal of relationships, and recalling the bonds that came as they appreciated afresh the common belief in and reliance on the God of their creation. *“The Deuteronomy legislation (laws) primary aim had been to create a closer uniformity of practice and to promote a healthy sense of national unity in honor of the one Lord God...it appears most probable that it was less the creation of a new unity than the prevention of further disunity of religious practice ...”*²

DEUTERONOMY 16:13-17 REVIEW AND REFLECTION:

- **Deut. 16:13** – This verse tells when and for how long this Festival of Booths was to last. Then, as now, people made plans for this thanksgiving time. **In Ancient Israel, people planned to be away from home and so prepared special temporary shelters – of booths - - to live under for the seven days festival.** Today, as Christians living in the United States,

¹The New Interpretation’s Bible: A Commentary in twelve Volumes, Abington Press, Nashville, Volume II, 1998, Clements, Ronald E., Samuel Davidson Professor of Old Testament, King’s College, University of London, DEUTERONOMY, p. 412

² Ibid, p. 413

family members and close friends often travel from various states and locations to gather at a central home/location so that they can celebrate and give thanks together to God for the many blessings and for the strength and courage given in the midst of troubling times. The gatherings provide a time to catch up on family hallmarks, to hold new babies, and to give hugs and shed tears with those who have lost loved ones since the last time everyone was together. Often special provisions are made with family members or with nearby hotels/motels to provide shelter for those visiting.

- **Deut. 16:14-15** – **Everyone in the community, regardless of their connection or status in the community or family, was to participate; no one was excluded. It was a time of rejoicing and fun for all.** Please note that even the strangers, orphans (the homeless), indentured and foreign slaves, and the widows in the area were to be invited to share in the worship, thanksgiving, and celebrations during the Festival of Booths. **This is a reminder to us as Christians to be a people of hospitality, making sure that others who might be alone or without provisions are included on special holidays such as Thanksgiving and the Christmas holidays.**
- **Deut. 16:16-17** – During each of the three festivals/feasts, all of the young men were required to “...bring a gift in proportion to the way the Lord your God has blessed you.” This was required as the consecration of each of the festivals in thanksgiving for God’s gift of the harvest and for new life that the harvest brought in terms of growth and prosperity for the community. Rituals such as these in which the young men were required to participate helped them to appreciate that **there were honorable responsibilities and positive outcomes as a result of the labor of their hands and as a result of God’s divine plan for the community.**

CLASS DISCUSSIONS (Small groups of 2 or 3)

1. Food from the ground, bushes, and trees are considered “God’s food” for that is what God put in the Garden of Eden for Adam and Eve to eat. It is this food, the green plants, the seeds/nuts, and other vegetation that provided then – and still now, the perfect nutrition for the body to function optimally. Ripened, fresh root vegetables and green leafy vegetables from the ground, fruit from bushes and trees, and newly harvested grains have a deeper, richer taste, even without seasonings and salt. Have you ever participated in the planting or harvesting of food? What was that experience of toiling to plant or harvest like for you? If you haven’t participated in growing your food, how do you think about food that comes from the ground versus from a laboratory or factory?
2. The stressors of the holiday celebrations are often reflected in “emotional eating.” When you are feeling stressed about something, do you reach, for example, for the chocolate candy or feel you deserve that fried chicken meal that is on special this week? Once you start eating your comfort food, do you find yourself wanting more and more? Do you taste it fully after the first couple of bites? Does it fully meet your needs? What comforts might you seek other than food that may more fully comfort you?



GROWING INTO A CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY OF SHARING AND GOOD WILL

ACTS 2:42-47

BACKGROUND:

In Acts 2:42-47 Luke, the author of “The Acts of the Apostles” or the “Book of Acts,” gives the reader a glimpse of a group of people who have confessed Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior and who are living out their new life in Christ Jesus together. The beginning of Acts 2 tells of the occasion in which Jews came “*from every nation under heaven*” into Jerusalem to celebrate the Pentecost – The Festival of Weeks (*Deut. 16:9-12*) which occurred “*seven weeks after the first cutting of the early harvest*” (*Lev. 13:15-16*), and was to be “*held on the fiftieth day after the Sabbath following the offering of the first sheaf.*” Thus, the title “Pentecost” (meaning *fiftieth*) was given to commemorate the occasion.³

In the beginning of Chapter 2 of Acts, during this festival the followers of Jesus Christ were gathered “*in one place. Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them.*” (*Acts 2:2-4*)

When the followers of Jesus came out of the place where they had been sitting, they began to move amongst the crowd and to speak to the people. **Each person “heard them speaking in his own tongue.”(v.6) The people knew that these men were Galileans and so were amazed at their ability to speak in another language.** Others, however, could not see the miracle of this and said simply that “*They have had too much wine.*” (v.13)

This experience for the apostles of Jesus Christ of the tongues of fire was a fulfillment of what Jesus promised in John 14:25-27, “All this I have spoken while still with you. But the Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you. Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.” And then again in Jesus tells them in John 16:12-15, “*I have much more to say to you, more than you can now bear. But when he, the Spirit of truth comes, He will guide you into all truth ...He will bring glory to me by taking from what is mine and make it known to you. All that belongs to the Father is mine. That is why I say the Spirit will take what is mine and make it known to you.*” Now, just as then, God’s Spirit is available to all to bring strength and healing and new hope, and new beginnings.

NOTE: As you learn to trust God’s Spirit at work in you about how to live a life of good health behaviors, you will start to feel more peaceful and self-assured about your new life and will become bolder about owning your new truth about your right to better health behaviors.

³The New Interpretation’s Bible: A Commentary in Twelve Volumes, Abington Press, Nashville, Volume II, 1998, Clements, Ronald E., Samuel Davidson Professor of Old Testament, King’s College, University of London, DEUTERONOMY, p. 412

You may not speak in different tongues, but your living an abundant life of good energy and vitality will speak volumes to those who witness your transformation.

In Acts 2:14-41, Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, addressed the crowd with boldness and a deeper understanding for himself of what the people needed and were longing to hear. In his speech, Peter's decisive claim was that: *“God’s resurrection of Jesus confirms him as Messiah and through him God has acted faithfully to the biblical promise to save the world from sin and death.”*⁴

Many who were there listening to Peter speak were caught in a spiritual pit of oppression from Roman rule. They had sinful and self-destructive responses and attitudes to their impoverished circumstances and no sense of options for escape. Peter’s oratory, however, was a Holy Spirit-inspired and heart-felt, passion-filled speech given to encourage and convince the people that there was (*and still is*) a new way out of the darkness and into the abundant life of love and acceptance that was offered through Jesus Christ.

ACTS 2:42-47: THE COMMON LIFE -- The early church lived out a life of community, where food, goods, learning, and growing in faith were shared.

- **Acts 2:42-43 – The apostles teachings, signs and wonders:**
 - **The apostles, once frightened and insecure, were inspired, and their passion to share the Good News ignited by the Holy Spirit.** All of the teachings of Jesus that they received have come to fruition.
 - The new followers of Jesus Christ, through the apostles, saw the manifestation of the power of the Holy Spirit by the “wonders and signs” of the apostles. What signs and wonders of God’s Holy Spirit have you witnessed?
- **Acts 2:44-45 —Fellowship: The followers “had everything in common.”** The implication is that the Spirit of God transformed believers into a common mindset of care and support for one another - body, mind, and spirit, which is known as *koinonia*. Proceeds from the selling of their personal things were shared with all. What are you willing to share to remove poverty and provide everyone with a roof over their heads and food for their tables? What guidelines do you believe would have to be set to receive such support?
- **Acts 2:46 – Corporate worship and breaking of bread together**
 - **Worship – God’s Spirit moves in each worshiper according to the need. Yet, it is in corporate or gathered worship that you raise a mighty, collective or corporate praise to God. It is in the collective prayer that God’s power is expanded and multiplied.** Corporate praise to God lifts those gathered for the courage, organization, love, and compassion needed by the people of God for the work that is to be done.

⁴ Ibid. Volume X, , 2002, Wall, Robert W. Professor of Biblical Studies, Department of Religion, Seattle Pacific University, Seattle, Washington, THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES, p. 62

- **Eating together with generous hearts** – In addition to being a ritual or sacrament of Holy Communion, this practice of a shared meal recalls a tradition of the practice of a shared meal after worship – **a meal that symbolized their common values and spirit – solidarity of mind and spirit.** What does the shared meal during the holiday season recall for you or what significance is this time of year for you? Consider the dietary restrictions in meal planning for yourself and for those gathering with you during your holiday season this year – for example, people with high blood pressure, congestive heart failure and /or diabetes. Talk with them, if possible, to learn what will be good for them to eat and about portion sizes. Learn what vegetables they enjoy eating. Ask them if they have a favorite recipe that supports their good health.
- **Acts 2:47 – Hospitality and sharing the practices that built the community** – In the beginning of the “new covenant” (Hebrews 8:6-13) people practiced the Good News that Jesus the Christ demonstrated in his love, compassion, and inclusion of the poor and outcasts. **People hungry and thirsty for new ways of living and being, saw in the believers in Jesus Christ, a new hope for a better community.** As followers of Jesus Christ, what kind of healthy community do you want for your church?

PERSONAL REFLECTION:

As you gather with family and loved ones over the upcoming Thanksgiving, Christmas, and New Year holidays, what rituals does your family practice? Why are they important? How do you remember the family members who have passed on to glory? Or, is that important in your family? Do you know someone or a family who has financial or other issues during this season for which you could be a blessing? How would you and your family feel about including them in the festivities of the season?

CLASS DISCUSSION IN SMALL GROUPS OF 2 OR 3 PEOPLE:

1. How do you find balance between tradition and mindfulness around dietary, financial, and relational concerns during this season of celebration and thanksgiving?
2. What gifts would you like to bring to celebrations that are in proportion to those the Lord has given you with regard to health? What would you like to share about what you have learned?
3. Koinonia is a Greek word that means “a common mindset of care and support for one another – body, mind, and spirit.” What church traditions or celebrations reflect koinonia? What family traditions reflect this concept of koinonia?
4. What uniformity of practice would you like to see or develop in your church with regard to food or other health practices? How might your ALIVE! group members develop *koinonia* to accomplish this in light of Deuteronomy?



5. What practices to protect your own health do you plan to put in place during the holidays? How might you build your own “shelter” from those foods or practices that may not be consistent with your goals?
6. As you think about feeding the hungry and sharing meals with people inside and outside of your family, what dietary concerns should you be aware of and what changes would be appropriate to make to assure that the overall health and well-being of those invited are considered?
7. How comfortable do you feel asking family members to bring more vegetables and fewer carbohydrates for the holiday gathering? How do you think they would respond?

DISCUSS SMALL GROUP FINDINGS

CLOSING REMARKS AND PRAYER



ALIVE BIBLE STUDY SERIES
Scriptures for Session 5
“Gathering, Feasting/Sharing/Thanksgiving”

Deuteronomy 16:13-17 New International Version (NIV)

The Festival of Tabernacles/Booths

¹³ Celebrate the Festival of Tabernacles for seven days after you have gathered the produce of your threshing floor and your winepress. ¹⁴ Be joyful at your festival—you, your sons and daughters, your male and female servants, and the Levites, the foreigners, the fatherless and the widows who live in your towns. ¹⁵ For seven days celebrate the festival to the LORD your God at the place the LORD will choose. For the LORD your God will bless you in all your harvest and in all the work of your hands, and your joy will be complete.

¹⁶ Three times a year all your men must appear before the LORD your God at the place he will choose: at the Festival of Unleavened Bread, the Festival of Weeks and the Festival of Tabernacles. No one should appear before the LORD empty-handed: ¹⁷ Each of you must bring a gift in proportion to the way the LORD your God has blessed you.

Acts 2:42-47 New International Version (NIV)

The Fellowship of the Believers

⁴² They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. ⁴³ Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. ⁴⁴ All the believers were together and had everything in common. ⁴⁵ They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. ⁴⁶ Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, ⁴⁷ praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.