

## HOME AND FAMILY IN BIBLE TIMES

### Mealtime Customs

Later this month, many Americans will celebrate Thanksgiving Day, a day where food and feasting play a prominent role. In the eating of these special meals, Christians are reminded that God has fully provided for their daily needs.

Many families have certain mealtime customs and traditions at Thanksgiving (e.g. the eating of a turkey). As we prepare to eat our special foods and honor our LORD, let's take a look at how dinners were served and eaten in Bible times. We find their ways to be quite different from our own, and yet God set a rich table for His people back then just as He does today.

#### Before Meal Preparation

How many times haven't you heard a parent say to a child, "Wash your hands, we're going to eat." This is nothing new. In the Scriptures, hands would also be washed prior to eating. A servant (or other family member) would come around with a basin and pitcher. While holding ones hands over the basin, the servant would pour water over them. Sometimes, the basin would also contain an inner tub with holes to allow the dirty water to run through and out of sight. The custom of washing hands before eating was a widespread practice and makes sense when you consider that the meal would then be eaten with hands and fingers.

#### Scripture Reference

In Mt 15:1-2 and Mk 7:1-5, Jesus' disciples are accused of failing to wash their hands before eating. Were the disciples engaging in some kind of unsanitary practice? No, rather the Pharisees had made a series of laws concerning how even hand-washing was to be done. They were complaining that the disciples weren't operating according to their

### Eating a Meal

The general custom when eating was to sit on the ground. The legs would either be folded under the body or behind it, so the person eating would be in something of a kneeling position. Only on special occasions and in the houses of the wealthy were meals eaten while sitting on chairs or stools. When the Bible speaks of "sitting down" to eat, it really means it (2 Kgs 4:38)!

#### Scripture Reference

Does this understanding of a "table" make clearer a Bible passage such as Psalm 69:22?

The "table" was most often a mat spread on the ground. (At certain times a low wooden stool might be used in place of a mat, but nothing like the tables we are accustomed to having in our homes.) On the table were placed the pots or baskets containing the food for the meal. These were the only dishes provided. Those eating did not have individual plates or bowls.

Instead of knife, fork, and spoon, the eastern people would eat with their hands. It might sound messy at first, but it was really not so bad. The "utensil" for eating was bread. The bread was baked in sheets, then pieces would be torn off and fashioned into scoops in order to eat meat from the pot or basket. If a person were eating a soup or broth, it too could be eaten with the bread that would simply soak it up. Consider how Boaz invited Ruth to supper saying, "At mealtime Boaz said to her, 'Come over here. Have some bread and dip it in the wine vinegar'" (Ru 2:14). This was how they ate— by dipping their hands (with bread) into the dish.

#### After the Meal

When the meal was over, the hands would be washed again and dried with a cloth napkin. The process for washing was similar to that used before the meal.



Eating a Meal

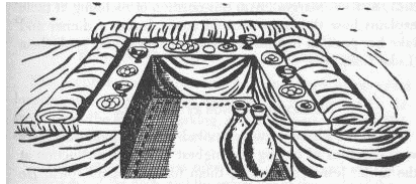
Wight

## Breakfast and Supper

The two meals generally eaten during the course of a day were breakfast and supper. Breakfast would be bread with something wrapped inside like olives or cheese. The men would eat while they were leaving for work in the fields and the women and children would eat before beginning their household duties. The evening meal was prepared while the men were returning from work. Usually this would consist of vegetables and some type of lentil stew.

## Special Suppers

Throughout the year there were various opportunities for special suppers and feasts. These banquets were by invitation only. Chairs were sometimes provided or else those eating would *recline* on cushions rather than sit on the ground. An example of such a special meal would be the Passover that Jesus ate with His disciples on Maundy Thursday evening. Jesus uses the imagery of a banquet to great effect in several places (Lk 14:8-10; Jn 13:23-25; Mk 10:35-37; Lk 12:35-37, etc.)



Banquet Table

Wight

## Prayers at Medtime

In the Christian home, it is very common to offer prayers before and after eating. This is something that has been done since the days of the Old Testament. Samuel the prophet was instructed to pray before eating a fellowship offering with Saul and the people (1 Sam 9:13). Jesus prayed before distributing the food at the feeding of the five thousand and also at the feeding of the four thousand. Prayers before meals were often simple utterances of thanksgiving to God for the food being received. The Jews would sometimes say, "God be praised" or "Blessed are You, Jehovah our God, King of the world, who causes bread to come forth from the earth."

After the meal, it was customary to offer another prayer of thanksgiving. Scriptural suggestion to this effect is given in Dt 8:10, "When you have eaten and are satisfied, praise the LORD your God for the good land he has given."

Medtime prayers are a fitting and proper thing to continue in our own homes. Our society is so accustomed to taking things for granted that it is good to honor and praise the One who actually provided all things (Ps 136:25). Martin Luther included the following meal prayers in his *Small Catechism*.



The eyes of all look to you, O Lord, and you give them their food at the proper time. You open your hand and satisfy the desires of every living thing. Amen.

Lord God, heavenly Father, bless us through these gifts which we receive from your bountiful goodness, through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; his love endures forever. Amen.

Lord God, heavenly Father, we thank you for all your gifts, through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

## In Summary

We do not eat exactly the same foods as those in Bible days and our tables are set much differently. Nevertheless, the things we eat are from the same source—our heavenly Father who gives us each day our daily bread. May we remember that and ever thank Him for it and for the Bread of Life, Jesus Christ.



## Resources

*Manners and Customs of Bible Lands* by Fred H. Wight  
*Bible Times and Customs* by Tim Gibson