

## Chapter 13: The Presence of Jesus

*John 6:1–21*

As among the Judean Jews in John 5, Jesus again faces increasing opposition in John 6 from the Galilean Jews. Nevertheless, the opposition of the Galilean Jews will look very different, since the Galilean Jews continue to eagerly seek out Jesus because of the signs that he can perform—up to this point at least. Jesus, for his part, displays remarkable kindness by feeding a crowd of five thousand sign-seekers who come to him in one of our Lord’s most remarkable miracles. Nevertheless, his kindness is not reciprocated, but it only fuels the fires of their greedy intentions to put their Creator to use according to their own designs.

While the sign-seekers benefit from the kindness of Jesus, it is suffering that marks the experience of the disciples. The details for this story that are unique in the Gospel of John give a slant on this story that contrasts the feasting of the unfaithful with the trials of the faithful, both when Jesus asks Philip how to feed the crowd in order “to test him” (John 6:6) and then when the disciples face a fierce storm on the Sea of Galilee (John 6:18). On the surface, the winners of this passage are the sign-seekers, while the disciples are the losers, facing a much more difficult set of circumstances. Nevertheless, John demonstrates through this passage that *it is better to suffer with Jesus than to feast without him*.

### Testing is Better than Feasting (John 6:1–11)

Jesus’ feeding of the five thousand is the only miracle included in each of the four Gospels.<sup>1</sup> This is striking, since John generally allows the other Gospels to stand as written without giving further comment. As we have already noted, John feels free to ignore major events in the Synoptic Gospels such as the baptism of Jesus, his transfiguration, or the institution of the Lord’s Supper. So, when John does write about events that we find in the other Gospels, John does so to bring out new details, or to describe the situations in a new light, or to use those elements for a different purpose than in the Synoptic Gospels. For example, while all four Gospels write something about John the Baptist, only in the Gospel of John do we read about the delegation of the Pharisees to test John the Baptist (John 1:19–28) or about John’s testimony regarding Jesus: “Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!” (John 1:29). Furthermore, while all four Gospels tell us about Jesus’ cleansing the temple during the last week of his life before the crucifixion, John writes about Jesus’ cleansing of the temple (whether about the same event or a different event) at the very beginning of his Gospel, and only John relates Jesus’ defiant challenge to the Jews: “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up” (John 2:19; cf. Matt. 26:61; Mark 14:58).

In the case of the feeding of five thousand, John’s inclusion of the miracle has a purpose that is unique from the other Gospels: this miracle allows Jesus to draw a contrast between the bread that Moses fed the Israelites in the wilderness (John 6:32) and the bread of life that he himself is (John

6:35), and we will explore those connections in the next study. For now as we study the miracle story itself, we notice a key difference between John's account and that of the Synoptic Gospels in the way John contrasts the experience of the disciples with the experience of the sign-seekers who do not genuinely believe in him. There is a deep irony in this story, where Jesus initially gives the sign-seekers exactly what they want (a sign) while testing his own disciples; nevertheless, it is the disciples who have the better experience of Jesus. This miracle story, then, fits in with the larger narrative in John 5–6 to recount Jesus' rejection by the Galilean Jews after seeing Jesus' rejection by the Judean Jews in John 5. By the end of John 6, both Galilean and Judean Jews alike will turn from Jesus (John 6:66; cf. 1:11) as Jesus continues his way toward the cross.<sup>2</sup>

### Seeing the Signs

In the context of what we have read in the Gospel of John so far, John 6:2 is dark and ominous: “And a large crowd was following him, because they saw the signs that he was doing on the sick.” We have seen these sign-seekers before, first in John 2:23–25, where many in Jerusalem during the Passover Feast believed in him when they saw the signs he was performing, but Jesus nevertheless refused to entrust himself to them because he perceived that their faith was not genuine. Then, we read in John 4:43–45 that many of those false believers who saw his signs at the feast were Galilean Jews who were eager to welcome him (John 4:45), but did not honor him (John 4:44). To the royal official from Capernaum, Jesus exclaimed, “Unless you see signs and wonders you will not believe” (John 4:48), pressing against the desperation of a man whose son lay dying in order to bring out the more important outcome: the faith of that official's entire household (John 4:53). Now that Jesus is back in Galilee, even more people are following Jesus (perhaps the news of the healing of the royal official's son has spread?), seeking to see additional signs that Jesus might perform. By this point, however, we have read enough of John's account to know that the success of Jesus' growing ministry is not what it seems: “Not the teaching but merely the signs were the great attraction.”

The growing fervor for Jesus seems to be part of the reason that John informs us that the Passover, “the feast of the Jews,” is at hand (John 6:4). Certainly, part of the significance of the impending remembrance of how God led his people out of their bondage in Egypt has to do with Jesus' teaching in the coming discourse about the new (and better) Exodus that Jesus is leading as the new (and better) Moses.<sup>4</sup> Just as God sustained the lives of the people of Israel after the Exodus by feeding them manna from heaven, so now the Father has sent Jesus as the bread from heaven who can give *eternal* life (John 6:32–35). But because the Passover also marks the annual remembrance of how God delivered his people from the bondage of Egypt, these sign-seeking Jews likely attempt to make Jesus the king (John 6:15) because the question, “When shall we be delivered from the bondage of Rome?” is at the top of their minds as they prepare for the feast.<sup>5</sup> They may even be gathered in such force at this time to see whether Jesus might be preparing to stage his insurrection *during* the Passover.

### Testing the Disciples

As Jesus sees the large crowd heading toward him, we learn here in the Gospel of John alone that Jesus directs his question to Philip: “Where are we to buy bread, so that these people may eat?” (John 6:5). There does not seem to be any obvious reason why Jesus selects Philip instead of any of the other disciples, but John's account of Jesus' singling out Philip from all the other disciples is striking,

particularly since John adds that Jesus said this only “to test him,” for Jesus already knows what he is going to do (John 6:6). Why does Jesus put Philip on the spot? Jesus must know that Philip will struggle to answer the question, so why embarrass him by asking the question at all?

And indeed, Philip has no idea what to say: “Two hundred denarii worth of bread would not be enough for each of them to get a little” (John 6:7). At this point, Andrew jumps into the conversation to defend Philip, pointing out that the only food in the whole crowd is the meal of the boy who has brought five barley loaves and two fish, “but what are they for so many?” (John 6:9). Philip actually tries to do the math and comes to a staggering sum that puts feeding this crowd outside the realm of possibility, but Andrew sees such an overwhelming task that he does not even try to estimate what it would cost or even how much food they would need to feed such a crowd.<sup>6</sup> Neither know what to say to Jesus’ question, but how could they possibly guess what Jesus is about to do?

### A Sign for the Sign-Seekers

After stumping his disciples, Jesus then gives them direct instruction: “Have the people sit down” (John 6:10), and everyone in the crowd of five thousand men (Matthew tells us that there were additional women and children beyond the five thousand men; Matt. 14:21) sits down, just as Jesus says. John’s description, “Jesus then *took* [*elaben*] the *loaves* [“bread”; *artous*], and *when he had given thanks* [*eucharistēsas*], he *distributed* [*diedōken*] them to those who were seated” (John 6:11) echoes the language of the institution of the Lord’s Supper: “And he *took* [*labōn*] *bread* [“a loaf”; *arton*] and *when he had given thanks* [*eucharistēsas*], he broke it and *gave* [*edōken*] it to them, saying, ‘This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me’” (Luke 22:19). Nevertheless, it is difficult to know whether John is making any kind of allusion to the Lord’s Supper for two reasons. First, these are the standard actions that a Jewish father would perform before *any* meal, and this is the standard description for those actions.<sup>7</sup> Second, John misses “many good opportunities” to make any reference to the Lord’s Supper more explicit by omitting the breaking of the bread (cf. Mark 6:41) or any kind of distribution of a cup.<sup>8</sup> It is *possible* that John is making a subtle reference to the Lord’s Supper, but it does not seem that the Lord’s Supper is at the center of what John wants to communicate at this point.

Instead, John wants us to focus on the fact that Jesus gives the sign-seekers exactly what they want: a sign. And not just any sign, but Jesus chooses a sign that powerfully impresses the crowd for two reasons. First, the Old Testament uses the image of feasting to foreshadow and foretell the reign of the Messiah—all the way from the manna that God gave his people in the wilderness during the days of Moses (Ex. 16) to the eschatological “feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wine, of rich food full of marrow, of aged wine well refined” (Isa. 25:6) that God promises to provide his people after God swallows up death forever (Isa 25:7–8).<sup>9</sup> Second, this is a sign that everyone in the crowd that day personally benefits from, since they all eat as much as they desire, to their fill (John 6:11–12). Don’t miss the irony here: after “testing” his own disciples, he dazzles the sign-seekers with an extraordinary miracle, even though he knows that they are not following him genuinely, because they only care about the signs that he performs (John 2:23–25). Jesus tests his own, while dramatically catering to the desires of those who are *not* genuinely his own.

## How Long, O Lord?

God's people often feel that we receive something less than God's full favor, especially as we compare our lives with the lives of the faithless who seem to thrive. The perennial lament of God's people, then, is "How long, O Lord?" (Job 7:19; Ps. 6:3; 13:1; 35:17; 74:10; 79:5; 80:4; 89:46; 90:13; 94:3; 119:84; Isa. 6:11; Jer. 47:6; Hab. 1:2; Zech. 1:12; Rev. 6:10). How long must we endure our suffering if we are indeed God's beloved people? Why should *we* suffer and languish while our enemies, the wicked who spurn and reject God, seem to prosper (Ps. 73:1–15)? Why must *we* be tested while the godless enjoy all the desires of their depraved hearts? Have we trusted the Lord in vain? In the details that John adds to this story, especially in the larger context of Jesus' interactions with the sign-seekers, we see a shocking irony: the enemies of Jesus enjoy blessings from the hand of Jesus, while the disciples of Jesus come off looking foolish when he tests them. What kind of justice is this?

We should recognize two truths regarding what is happening here. First, it is not as though Jesus has suddenly failed to perceive the hearts of these sign-seekers. He knows exactly who they are and what they are after. Jesus' miracle is not an attempt to win them over, but simply an of undeserved favor to those who are right at this moment rejecting him in their hearts. The more complete rejection of the Galilean Jews does not come until the next day (John 6:66), but their rejection of Jesus in their hearts is up and running during this feast—and Jesus knows it. In fact, the more we reflect on the kindness of Jesus in this situation, we must ask the question that William Hendriksen writes in his comments on this passage: "which virtue shines forth most gloriously: Christ's love or his power?"<sup>10</sup> Jesus displays his power *in spite* of the crowd's lack of faith.

Second, although it seems like Jesus has a curious way of showing it, he has not stepped back from caring for his disciples. In fact, he tests them *because* he loves them and desires to stretch their faith. Jesus has difficult things that he must teach the next day (John 6:60), and he wants to prepare his disciples to trust *him* rather than trusting their circumstances as ultimately important. His love transcends the desires of his disciples because he employs tests in order to claim their hearts more fully. Although the feasting of the sign-seekers is more pleasant in the short-term, the testing of the disciples is *better*. When Jesus tests us, therefore, we should never doubt that he works in the same way and seeks the same goal: our hearts.

## Dry Morsels are Better than Power (John 6:12–15)

After everyone eats as much as they like, Jesus instructs his disciples: "Gather up the leftover fragments, that nothing may be lost" (John 6:12). While each of the Synoptic Gospels tell us that there are twelve baskets full of broken pieces left over after the meal (Matt. 14:20; Mark 6:43; Luke 9:17), only John tells us that the disciples gather up these fragments at the command of Jesus. Moreover, only John tells us *why* they gather up the fragments, "that nothing may be lost." In the other Gospels, the reference to the twelve baskets of leftovers only underscores the abundance of Jesus' provision in this miracle. In the Gospel of John, however, we see the true significance behind the leftovers: Jesus is instructing his disciples to take the additional food with them to eat, so that nothing may be lost.

In the context of the wider narrative of John 6, Jesus' instructions are more significant than we

might realize. First, Jesus is providing an additional meal (or, depending on the size of the baskets, perhaps two or three additional meals) to his disciples from the leftovers of this miracle. When the Galilean Jews cross the Sea of Tiberius the next day to demand that Jesus continue to feed them (cf. John 6:26, 30–31), however, Jesus will refuse to feed them even *one* additional meal. While Jesus may have tested his disciples at the beginning of this narrative, he now makes sure that they *alone* take the leftover food with them to eat later. Second, Jesus' instructions for his disciples to gather up leftovers for eating later is all the more striking when we compare the instructions that Moses gave the Israelites for eating manna. Jesus is explicitly re-enacting the miracle of manna in the wilderness (John 6:32) in order to claim that he, the bread of life who has come down from heaven (John 6:34–35) is a greater miracle than the manna. Part of the way he demonstrates his superiority arises from the fact that the Israelites were forbidden from keeping leftover manna overnight (Ex. 16:19–20).<sup>11</sup> Like the Israelites who lived during the days of Moses, the crowd of Galilean Jews does not receive a second meal from the leftovers of this miracle, for Jesus does not allow them to take the leftovers with them—that privilege belongs to Jesus' disciples alone.

### Quiet, Ordinary, Dry Leftovers

Third, we should also recognize here that Jesus does not perform another miraculous sign, but he quietly instructs his disciples to gather up the *leftovers* from his earlier miracle. He meets the needs of his disciples here, but in a quiet way, rather than dramatically. There is a metaphor here for ministry, in that God usually cares for the ongoing needs of his people quietly and simply rather than with flashy miracles. As James K. A. Smith writes, “too often we look for the Spirit in the extraordinary when God has promised to be present in the ordinary. We look for God in the fresh and novel, as if his grace were always an ‘event,’ when he has promised that his Spirit faithfully attends the ordinary means of grace—in the Word, at the Table.”<sup>12</sup> We may become discouraged that Jesus seems to be putting us to the test while the wicked enjoy the extraordinary experiences of wealth or power; however, when we do so, we should remember the simple ways that God is providing for us. Even for our spiritual needs, God does not want us living by sight, according to signs and miracles, but by faith, according to the ongoing, leftover provision of the miracle of the resurrection of Jesus Christ that God gives to his church. Jesus instructs his disciples to gather up these leftovers because he *loves* them.

In an important way, then, *this* meal—the meal from the leftovers of the miraculous feast—is the *better* meal of the day. As Proverbs 17:1 reminds us, “Better is a dry morsel with quiet than a house full of feasting with strife.” The sign-seekers have enjoyed their feasting, but their pleasure is fleeting. Because they will not repent and believe on Jesus, this feast might as well have been the last meal provided to a convict on death row—they get everything they want, but they feast on the way to their impending doom. The disciples, however, are not at strife with Jesus. They receive the dry morsel from the leftovers of the feast in the quiet peace of faith, love, and joy in their relationship with the Lord.

### The Unwilling King

Jesus has catered to the desires of this crowd by giving them this great sign, but we would be mistaken if we imagined that Jesus' miracle satisfied the crowd. Rather than rejoicing in fulfillment of what Jesus has done, the crowd's desires amplify. Jesus has demonstrated his power, and John tells

us that “When the people saw the sign that he had done, they said, ‘This is indeed the Prophet who is to come into the world!’” (John 6:14). Once again, the Galilean Jews believe only when they see the signs (John 4:48), and even though they confess that Jesus is “the Prophet who is to come into the world,” John’s whole depiction of this sign-seeking faith tells us that they are still only *welcoming* him (cf. John 4:45) rather than *honoring* him (cf. John 4:44) as he deserves. They have a kind of faith, but it is a dead faith that is wholly inadequate to save them.

Furthermore, their false honor for Jesus extends even to the point of attempting to force him to become king (John 6:15). Now, we should note that the Galileans are not wrong in their assessments. Jesus is indeed the Prophet who is to come into the world—that is, the Prophet foretold in Deuteronomy: “The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your brothers—it is to him you shall listen...” (Deut. 18:15). Furthermore, Jesus is the true King of Israel (John 12:13), for he is the rightful heir to the throne of David (Mark 11:10). The people of Israel are not wrong in identifying the offices of Jesus; rather, they go wrong in their evaluation of the *significance* of those offices: “Their attention was focused on food (v. 26) and victory (v. 15)—not on the divine self-disclosure mediated through the incarnate Son, not on the Son as the bread of life, not on a realistic assessment of their own need.”<sup>13</sup> They wrongly expect Jesus to execute his office as King to establish an earthly kingdom *for their immediate benefit*, despite the fact that his kingdom is not of this world (John 18:36).<sup>14</sup> Therefore, they sinfully attempt to take Jesus by force to become king over them.

Jesus, however, withdraws from their grasp onto the mountain by himself. Although Jesus earlier gave them the desires of their heart in the sign he performed, he now withdraws from them, refusing to go along with their additional desire to make him king. Jesus cares for his disciples by giving them quiet, ordinary, dry leftovers to eat in peace, but Jesus rejects the crowd by escaping from their midst. Note this well: those who do not live by faith may seem to gain the desires of their hearts for a time, but they cannot do so forever. Everything they receive comes as kindness from the hands of Jesus, but eventually that kindness must end if the unbelieving persist in their hard-heartedness. God’s people, on the other hand, may never receive everything that we desire, yet we can trust that God will quietly meet our needs and that he will never abandon us.

## The Presence of Jesus is Better than his Absence (John 6:16–21)

While Jesus remains on the mountain, his disciples embark in a boat across the Sea of Galilee (John 6:16–17). John tells us that the hour is late when the disciples head out, for “It was now dark, and Jesus had not yet come to them” (John 6:17). Beyond suggesting the relative time when this sea voyage takes place, the “dark” functions throughout the Gospel of John to symbolize some kind of spiritual darkness. With Nicodemus, the night in which he came to Jesus (John 3:2) functioned as a symbol of his spiritual blindness (John 3:3). With Judas, the night (John 13:30) symbolizes his spiritual wickedness in betraying Jesus. For the disciples, however, the darkness powerfully symbolizes the absence of Jesus, who has “not yet come to them.”<sup>15</sup> The disciples do not enjoy the presence of Jesus at the beginning of the night, but Jesus will not remain apart from them for long.

### The Presence of Jesus

On the sea, the disciples enter into a trial far more severe than the way that Jesus “tested” Philip

earlier in the day: “The sea became rough because a strong wind was blowing” (John 6:18). Still, their fear from the sea is nothing compared to their fear when they see Jesus walking on the sea: “When they had rowed about three or four miles, they saw Jesus walking on the sea and coming near the boat, and they were frightened” (John 6:19). Once Jesus says, “It is I; do not be afraid” (John 6:20), we read that their fears are stilled so that “Then they were glad to take him into the boat” (John 6:21). We should not overlook the fact that the presence of Jesus *first* brings additional fear and only afterward brings gladness. When we deal with Jesus, we are not dealing with someone we can contain, comprehend, or control. Jesus Christ is neither safe nor tame, and it is not without reason that the Scriptures urge us to fear the Lord, for indeed, there is no wisdom apart from a healthy fear of the Lord (Prov. 1:7). When we deal with Jesus, we must readily acknowledge our powerlessness in his presence.

Still, Jesus does not desire to leave his disciples in their fear, and he identifies himself to put their fears to rest. John Calvin points out that Jesus will later use the very same words, “It is I,” to identify himself to those who seek to arrest him, but when he does so, his enemies “drew back and fell to the ground” (John 18:6). John Calvin explains these two very different responses to Jesus this way:

The reason of the distinction is, that he is sent as a Judge to the reprobate and unbelievers for their destruction; and, therefore, they cannot bear his presence without being immediately overwhelmed. But believers, who know that he is given to them to make propitiation, as soon as they hear his name, which is a sure pledge to them both of the love of God and of their salvation, take courage as if they had been raised from death to life, calmly look at the clear sky, dwell quietly on earth, and, victorious over every calamity, take him for their shield against all dangers.<sup>16</sup>

The Lord of the cosmos, before whom every knee will bow and every tongue confess his lordship (Phil. 2:10–11) is not ultimately a source of terror for his people, but of joy—even though we *fear* him. Unlike those who rebel against his authority, we have no reason to fear his power because faith means believing that he will use his power for our good.

Furthermore, once the disciples take Jesus into the boat, we read that “immediately the boat was at the land to which they were going” (John 6:21). Some take this to mean simply that the disciples had no further trouble rowing the rest of the way to shore after struggling for the first three or four miles (John 6:19).<sup>17</sup> Nevertheless, John tells us that the disciples arrive “immediately” to the shore. Why should we consider it “far-fetched” to believe that Jesus guides the boat safely to harbor if we also believe that he actually walks on the water? John may even have in mind Psalm 107:23–32, where the psalmist praises the Lord for bringing storm-tossed sailors “to their desired haven” (Ps. 107:30).<sup>18</sup> After barely making any headway during the first part of their voyage, “the exhausted disciples were not compelled to begin their rowing again in order to cover the considerable distance to the shore.... That distance melted away the moment Jesus stepped into the boat.”<sup>19</sup>

At the beginning of this narrative, Jesus put his own disciples to the test (John 6:6) while dramatically meeting the needs of the sign-seekers who did not truly believe in him. By the end of this narrative, we see Jesus dramatically meeting the needs of his own disciples while he leaves the sign-seekers behind, slipping away from them in the night by walking across the sea rather than entering into any boat (John 6:22–24). If we worried that Jesus was too kind to the sign-seekers and

too harsh with his own disciples earlier, we see now that the tables have turned. Once we truly recognize the future of judgment stored up for the arrogant, we no longer envy their ease and comfort in the present moment (Ps. 73). This does not mean that if we follow Jesus long enough we will avoid any storms in life, but that we will grow to take increasing comfort from his presence in the *midst* of the storms that we face.

### The Absence of Jesus

From one perspective, the Galilean crowd has a much better night than the disciples, since the Galileans do not face the storm that the disciples must endure. The disciples suffer out on the Sea of Galilee while the Galileans avoid the terrors of the storm altogether. Nevertheless, by avoiding the storm, the crowd also misses an opportunity to see a greater sign than the feeding miracle as Jesus safely guides his disciples to their harbor. More than that, the crowd also does not benefit from the experience of the presence of Jesus. In comparison to the disciples, the crowd enjoys the ease and comfort that they seek; however, they do not experience the way in which the presence of Jesus makes even suffering worthwhile. Given the choice of suffering with Jesus and feasting without him, those who have tasted the goodness of Jesus in the midst of suffering would never choose to be apart from him, no matter how painful our circumstances become. The Galileans get what they want by feasting and avoiding the danger of a storm on the Sea, but they fail to get Jesus, so they lose *everything*.

In fact, they even lose what they have by forfeiting the meal ticket that Jesus gives them in this story. The next day, the crowd will wake up hungry and restless, determined to track Jesus down so that he might feed them again. Jesus will recognize their motivations with ease: “Truly, truly, I say to you, you are seeking me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves” (John 6:26). The miraculous signs they have witnessed have not brought about a true faith, but they only seek Jesus in order to find their next meal. Now, food is a legitimate human need. This crowd is not sinful to desire food, but their sinfulness lies in the fact that they do not want Jesus for *Jesus*, but only for what Jesus can provide for them. They want the gifts rather than the Giver. Because of this, Jesus will now refuse to meet even their legitimate need to eat. He will not miraculously provide their next meal for them, because he is not trying to be just another Moses, feeding the Israelites in the wilderness as in the past. Instead, Jesus is *greater* than Moses, and he wants to give them something better than bread that perishes—he wants to give them *himself*, the bread of life.

In the next passage, then, Jesus will refuse to meet the needs of this crowd by providing them another meal, but he will do so not out of cruelty, but out of kindness. The crowd ravenously demands power and food from him, without the least desire to receive the good gift that *Jesus* wants to give them. Even so, Jesus continues to work toward their repentance and faith. They will persist in their hard-hearted rejection of him, but Jesus still holds himself out to them with magnificent patience and kindness. Jesus’ goodness transcends their petty desires, but they refuse to come to him that they may have life (cf. John 5:40).

How do you respond to the kindness of Jesus? Do you take what you receive and then greedily demand more, or do you stand in awe of his generosity toward you when you have least deserved it? The Apostle Paul observes that every moment of our lives that we escape the judgment of God comes by pure mercy, but that no one will be able to escape the judgment of God (Rom. 2:3). So, he



asks, “Or do you presume on the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience, not knowing that God’s kindness is meant to lead you to repentance? But because of your hard and impenitent heart you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath when God’s righteous judgment will be revealed” (Rom. 2:4–5). What is your response to the kindness, forbearance, and patience that God shows to you?

### Better to Suffer with Jesus

The movement of this story traces the inversion of the circumstances of the sign-seekers with that of the disciples. While the sign-seekers seem to get the best experience in the first part of this story, Jesus eventually abandons the crowd altogether to meet the desperate needs of his disciples with the extraordinary grace of his presence. To both groups of people, Jesus displays nothing but kindness, grace, and mercy, but each group responds to Jesus’ kindness in radically different ways. If Philip is embarrassed by having failed the test Jesus gave to him, he does not let on, and, more importantly, he does not leave Jesus—even when the Galileans eventually depart from Jesus by the thousands (John 6:66–69), and even when another one of Jesus’ own disciples will eventually betray him (John 6:70–71). The disciples trust Jesus to provide for their basic needs (John 6:12) and to protect them in the midst of storms (John 6:19–21), even when they must be just as baffled as the Galilean Jews to hear Jesus insisting that any who would follow him must eat his flesh and drink his blood (John 6:53–58). They do not understand Jesus, and they certainly do not control Jesus, but they *trust* Jesus to continue following him by faith. By the grace of God working in their lives, they know that it is better to suffer with Jesus than to feast without him.

The crowd, on the other hand, responds to the kindness of Jesus by escalating their greed. One gift is not enough to satisfy their hunger or to drive them to believe in Jesus. Instead, they see an *opportunity* in Jesus of someone who might usefully meet all their needs and desires (at least, the needs and desires that *they* recognize), and they seek to force him to be their earthly king and to continue providing bread for them to eat. They do not want Jesus, and they spurn his kindness. Instead, they want what he can do for them. Because of their lack of faith, Jesus slowly withdraws his hand of blessing from them and vanishes from their presence into the night.

These observations cannot explain why we must suffer, and neither do they make suffering into a good thing in itself. The goodness in this story is not the suffering, but the presence of Jesus, who is an indescribable comfort to us in the times of our affliction. The gracious presence of Jesus is so great and good that we are better off by meeting him in the midst of suffering than we would be if we left us alone to riches, feasting, and pleasure without him. If you are suffering, take comfort in the presence of Jesus. If you are feasting, be careful not to get so satisfied with the gifts of this world that you forget your ultimate need: the incarnate Son of God, the Lord Jesus Christ. No matter where you are, *believe* in him.

### Discussion Questions

1. Why do you think Jesus puts Philip to the test? Why do you think God puts his people to the test? Why do you think God is currently putting *you* to the test?
2. Take a few minutes to think of as many ways as possible that God quietly provides for your basic

needs. How many things do we take for granted, even though God provides for us out of the kindness of his mercy?

3. What would be lost if Jesus had allowed the Jews to press him into service as king? Why did Jesus' own road toward glory and power require testing and suffering—especially at the cross?

4. How do you respond to the presence of Jesus in your life? For example, how do you respond to the imposition of the Holy Spirit and the correction of God's word? Is Jesus a threat to you, or a comfort?

## Notes

1. Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 267.

2. Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to John*, vol. I, 216.

3. Lenski, *The Interpretation of John's Gospel*, 429.

4. Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 268–69.

5. Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to John*, vol. I, 219.

6. Ridderbos, *The Gospel According to John*, 210–11.

7. Ridderbos, *The Gospel According to John*, 214–15.

8. Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 270.

9. “For the significance of the story we must bear in mind that the figure of eating and drinking is widely used in the Old Testament. It is a figure of prosperity (‘nothing is better for a man under the sun than to eat and drink and be glad’; Eccl. 8:15; cf. also Eccl. 3:13; 5:18), and it is often used of the blessings the people of God would enjoy in the promised land (Deut. 8:9; 11:15; Neh. 9:36, etc.). Contrariwise, not to be able to eat is disaster (Eccl. 6:2). The metaphor of eating is used also of spiritual blessing. There are some interesting passages where people are said to eat God’s word (Jer. 15:16; Ezek. 2:8; 3:1, etc.), but these are probably not the most apposite for our purpose. Eating is sometimes associated with the vision of God (perhaps because it was so characteristic of the sacrificial system), as when Moses and his companions ‘saw God, and they ate and drank’ (Exod. 24:11; cf. also Deut. 12:7; 15:20; 27:7; Ezra 6:21; Neh. 8:10; Ezek. 44:3). There may also be some link with the experiences of Israel in the wilderness at the time when God ‘rained down manna for the people to eat, he gave them the grain of heaven’ (Ps. 78:24). So the prophet holds out before the people the promise of God: ‘If you are willing and obedient, you will eat the best from the land’ (Isa. 1:19; cf. Ezra 9:12). On the other hand, disobedience to God will lead to the absence of satisfaction in eating (Lev. 26:23–26). So also the gracious invitation goes forth: ‘come, buy and eat!...Why spend money on what is not bread, and your labor on what does not satisfy? Listen, listen to me, and eat what is good’ (Isa. 55:1–2). So, too, the Psalmist can look forward to the day when ‘The poor will eat and be satisfied’ (Ps. 22:26). From all this it is not surprising that the messianic banquet was one of the ways in which the delights of the age to come were set forth (e.g. Enoch 62:14).” (Morris, *The Gospel According to John*, 301.)

10. Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to John*, vol. I, 227.

11. Keener, *The Gospel of John*, vol. 1, 668.

12. James K. A. Smith, *You are What You Love: The Spiritual Power of Habit* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2016), 67.

13. Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 271.

14. Calvin, *Commentary on the Gospel According to John*, vol. I, 233. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/>

ccel/calvin/calcom34.xii.ii.html>

15. Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 274.

16. Calvin, *Commentary on the Gospel According to John*, vol. I, 237. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom34.xii.ii.html>>

17. “The concluding statement, ‘and immediately the boat was at the land to which they were going,’ apparently only means that once Jesus was with them there were no further problems and they soon reached the other side of the lake. There is no explicit mention here, as in the other gospels, of ‘a stilling of the storm.’ Some commentators see here instead a ‘miraculous landing.’ But this seems extremely far-fetched.” (Ridderbos, *The Gospel According to John*, 218.)

18. Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 276.

19. Lenski, *The Interpretation of John's Gospel*, 444.