

# The Second To Last Supper

*John 6:1-15*

<sup>ESV</sup> **John 6:1** After this Jesus went away to the other side of the Sea of Galilee, which is the **Sea of Tiberias**.

<sup>2</sup> And a **large crowd** was following him, because **they saw the signs** that he was doing on the sick.

<sup>3</sup> Jesus **went up on the mountain**, and there he sat down **with his disciples**.

<sup>4</sup> Now **the Passover**, the feast of the Jews, was at hand.

<sup>5</sup> Lifting up his eyes, then, and seeing that a large crowd was coming toward him, Jesus said to Philip, "Where are we to buy **bread**, so that these people may eat?"

<sup>6</sup> He **said this to test him**, for **he himself knew** what he would do.

<sup>7</sup> **Philip** answered him, "Two hundred denarii (eight months) worth of bread would not be enough for each of them to get a little."

<sup>8</sup> One of his disciples, **Andrew**, Simon Peter's brother, said to him,

<sup>9</sup> "There is a boy here who has **five barley loaves and two fish**, but what are they for so many?"

<sup>10</sup> Jesus said, "**Have the people sit down.**" Now there was **much grass** in the place. So the men sat down, about **five thousand** in number.

<sup>11</sup> Jesus then took the loaves, and when he had given thanks, he distributed them to those who were seated. So also the fish, as much as they wanted.

<sup>12</sup> And when they had eaten their fill, he told his disciples, "**Gather up the leftover fragments, that nothing may be lost.**"

<sup>13</sup> So they gathered them up and filled **twelve baskets** with fragments from the five barley loaves left by those who had eaten.

<sup>14</sup> When the people saw the sign that he had done, they said, "**This is indeed the Prophet who is to come into the world!**"

<sup>15</sup> Perceiving then that they were **about to come and take him by force to make him king**, Jesus withdrew again to **the mountain** by himself.

## Why Did Jesus Feed the Masses?

The passage today is one of the most famous in the Bible. It gives the account of Jesus feeding five thousand men, meaning that there could have been more than 20,000 people that Jesus fed.<sup>1</sup> This spectacular miracle is performed for several reasons. Some of the reasons are stated **explicitly**. He saw the crowd and had **compassion** on them (**John 6:5**; cf. **Matt 14:14**). He did it to “**test**” his disciples (particularly Philip, **John 6:6**). Others are **implicit**. Some of these implicit things we can find out by noticing what **kind of person this Jesus is** from the miracle he is performing or by carefully reading the story as crafted by John and by understanding why

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<sup>1</sup> D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John* (Leicester, England; Grand Rapids, Mich.: InterVarsity Press; W.B. Eerdmans, 1991), 270.

the people call Jesus “the Prophet” (vs. 14). Others we won’t be able to see clearly until later in the chapter, when he begins to comment more on what his reasons for performing this miracle are.<sup>2</sup>

As we are introduced to the story, we learn what are seemingly incidental facts. “After this ...” it begins. After what? After Jesus has finished telling the Jews that they have rejected many the witnesses that testify that Jesus is their promised Messiah. Jesus had said this in Jerusalem, but now he returns again to Galilee in the north, near where he was raised. The setting is the “Sea of Tiberias,” which is simply another name for the Sea of Galilee. This will become important in the next story when Jesus walks on water.

Next we are told that a “large crowd” was following Jesus, because they saw the signs that he was doing on the sick. Jesus had been gaining popularity for quite some time now. Vs. 4 tells us that this event takes place very close to the Passover. This is remarkable for a couple of reasons, one which will become more apparent later in the chapter when Jesus starts to refer to himself as “manna from heaven.” The more immediate reason is that this puts the time frame between chapters 5 and 6 as anywhere between 6 months to 1 year.<sup>3</sup> In other words, John has skipped perhaps as much as an entire

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<sup>2</sup> These would include knowing their hearts, preaching difficult doctrines, showing them how they are just like their ancestors who rejected him in the Exodus, and creating a crisis moment in his ministry when false believers leave him, because they do not like the kind of Messiah he actually is.

<sup>3</sup> See Hendriksen, *John*, 1:215-16.

year of Jesus' ministry. That means, John had a lot of other things he could have written about between the two chapters, but he didn't. So he must have had a reason for putting this story here, rather than other stories. That reason is theological, or more to the point, to induce faith in Christ; it is directly related to the way he ended the previous chapter, for he gives us many clues that this is the case.

These clues are part of the "incidental" features of the story: The crowd sees "signs" (vs. 2), He goes up a "mountain" (vs. 3), it is the "Passover" (vs. 4), He starts talking about "bread" (vs. 5), he is "testing" Philip (vs. 6), they "gather up the leftovers" (vs. 12), there are twelve baskets left-over (vs. 13), they see Jesus as "the Prophet" (vs. 14), he returns to the "mountain" (vs. 15) and many more continue on throughout the chapter. But there is nothing "incidental" in God's word. God wrote every word for a reason. John (and for that matter, Matthew, Mark, and Luke who also preserve this story), is painting his own inspired picture for you. He didn't have to tell you these things, but he did. He could have told you other things, but he didn't. This is the picture he is painting. Like a scene in a movie or a play, it flows out of chapter 5 (since this is a book after all, not a collection of isolated sayings and stories).

For example, let's think about the people. A large crowd has been following Jesus because they saw "the signs" that he was doing. **Believing in the signs** of Jesus is one of the **witnesses** he talked about in chapter 5. But looking just at

signs and not to the reality to which they point is never “a good sign.” For in other places Jesus says, “**An evil and adulterous generation seeks a sign**” (**Matt 12:39**). Part of the purpose of this miracle is to test their faith. What will they believe, the signs or the Son?

Signs are funny things. People naturally long for signs, but far too often put their trust in the sign rather than the thing which it signifies. The kinds of signs we are talking about here are **miraculous signs**. Feeding 20,000 people with a few loaves and fish is miraculous. Walking on water is a miraculous sign. But what is amazing is that later in the chapter, in fact it was the very next day, though they had seen and been a part of this feeding sign, these people will tell Jesus that they want another sign (**John 6:30**) in order that he might “really” prove to them that he is the Messiah. You would think that feeding all these people the way he did would have already proven that to them, but that’s the problem with trusting in signs rather than the person. Signs never satisfy. You can sit there and beg for God to give you a sign in your life that he is with you, but if that’s all you are looking for, your faith is already misplaced.

Consider the very ordinary signs we that remain today: Baptism and the Lord’s Supper. These are not miraculous signs, yet these signs point you to Christ. Still, some people put the trust in the sign itself saying, “**Baptism itself saves you**” or “**the Supper IS Jesus’ literal body**” (which we will talk about at the end of the chapter). Other people don’t like these signs, because they are too boring, too mundane, too ordinary. It has

become popular to replace both signs in the church with extraordinary signs, exciting signs, signs of our own making or of supposed godly origin thinking that if they see someone speak in tongues or get healed miraculously by a faith-preacher that this will induce belief in Christ. Friends, even when he fed 5,000 men besides women and children from an amount of food that would barely fill one person's stomach, they would not believe it. That is why you must not look to the miracle, but to the miracle-worker.

Earlier in John's gospel we were told what looking at the signs can be. It is a "sign" of unbelief, a "sign" that you are only interested in the spectacle. "Many believed in his name when they saw the signs that he was doing. But Jesus on his part did not entrust himself to them, because he knew all people ... and knew what was in a man" (John 2:23-24). One of the biggest points of the story today is how Jesus "tests" his disciples regarding this very thing. We are almost ready to see this, but not quite yet. There is something else that comes first.

## **The Compassion of Christ**

It says that upon seeing the large crowd, Jesus "went up on the mountain, and there he sat down with his disciples" (John 6:3). You can see from this that the disciples are finally going to play a role in a story. But first, it says that as he was sitting there, he lifted up his eyes and saw the large crowd making their way up the mountain to be with him (vs. 5). Now, it was



Passover (vs. 4). And Jesus talks to Philip, the brother of Nathanael, and asks him about buying bread for all of these people (vs. 5). Let us pause for a moment.

*In vs. 5*, is there any reason why would Jesus be concerned with buying bread for these people? It is because “he saw” them. The other Gospel accounts tell us, “When he went ashore he saw a great crowd, and he had compassion on them” (Matt 14:14; Mk 6:34). The Savior is a compassionate savior. He is not like the gods, who could care less about men and women. He is a person driven to emotional action when he sees their distress.

In this case, their distress was two-fold. First, they were hungry. Why else would he want to feed them? Physical hunger is a very real need, for we are not spirits floating around in the air. We are physical creatures, and it is good in and of itself to take care of physical needs. It is funny how in Matthew and Mark’s account, the disciples tell Jesus to send them away into the villages so that they can buy their own food (Matt 14:15; Mark 6:34-35). They knew that they were hungry, but this isn’t a great statement of compassion on their part. They were clearly tired and had had enough for one day. What one person could call concern for their hunger another could just as easily call selfishness and an attempt to be done with them for the night.

Jesus isn’t like that. In Matthew and Mark, Jesus tells the disciples “You give them something to eat.” Here it is a little more specific. He asks Philip, “Where are we to buy bread, so

that these people may eat?” (John 6:5). Jesus was going to feed the people, because they were hungry. He cares about our needs and provides for them. Does he not teach us to pray, “Give us this day our daily bread” (Matt 6:11; Luke 11:3)? What does this mean if not that God cares about our needs?

Notice, I said “needs,” I did not say “wants.” The prayer does not say, “Give us this day our X-Box 360, our red Lamborghini.” He tells us to ask for that which we need, for the necessities of life. The promise is that God grants those, and we are to ask. The story here is that *even when we don't ask*, he sees us anyway, knows our need, has compassion, and the power to do more than we can ask or imagine. None of these people asked Jesus to feed them, yet he did so anyway. The miracle shows displays power to act, so it is not an empty promise.

But “bread,” both in the Lord's Prayer and in our story is **more than physical food**. Don't discount the physical as if that really doesn't matter to God. But don't think that this is all Jesus is feeding the people with in this miracle, either. One mistake is just as bad as the other. In fact, it is the later mistake, of thinking that this was just about filling their bellies, that revealed the heart of unbelief. No, Jesus' compassion was for more than their need for physical bread. His miracle was more than a feeding with physical food. He knew their need for **bread that truly satisfies**, for living bread, for bread that comes down from heaven. “**Man does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth**



of God.” That Word, according to our Gospel, is Christ himself. Yes, he was feeding them with himself. The compassionate Savior was feeding them himself, telling them to trust in him and look to him. But could they see it? Did they want it? Did they care? Was it just about signs? Would they display faith by worshiping him, bowing to him, praying to him, and turning to him? Each time we gather as a church, the Savior is even feeding you with both physical and spiritual food. He has invited you to a banquet of Word and Sacrament, or prayer and fellowship. It is a royal feast prepared by a great King. Will you eat the food that he gives and be satisfied in it? Or do you long for something more, perhaps not even believing that he is even feeding you at all?

## God is Testing Them

It is curious that Jesus asks Philip this question about bread. **Why Philip?** We know something about Philip from this Gospel. It is Philip who made a great declaration of faith while his brother Nathanael showed nothing but doubt. **“Philip found Nathanael and said to him, ‘We have found him of whom Moses in the Law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph’” (John 1:45).** This is another tie with chapter 5. This confession from Philip from the OT stands in stark contrast to the lack of confession from the Pharisees who failed to believe Moses and the Prophets.

Yet, we learn next that Jesus said this to Philip to **“test him” (vs. 6).** Let me say two things about this test. First, **Jesus**

knew the outcome of this test, for he is omniscient. When God tests a person, it is not out of ignorance, as some are teaching today. His purposes are for us, not for himself. The test is for our sake, not him. John makes this perfectly clear. John loves to tell us that Jesus knows all sorts of things that no ordinary person can possibly know. In fact, Jesus revealed this supernatural knowledge to Nathanael, right after Philip told him about Jesus (“Before Philip called you, when you were under the fig tree, I saw you” (John 1:48)). If Jesus really knows all things, then you can’t hide anything from him. Too many people get it in their heads that they can hide their sin from Jesus, but he is omniscient and knows you better than you know yourself. Therefore, in light of his omniscience, you need to confess those sins to him and turn from them, because you are not hiding anything from him.

There isn’t really a sin, yet, that we know about from Philip. But it seems like his response to the question--to the test--reveals that even a man that can have such simple faith, who knew how to read his Bible, who was such a great evangelist, has sins he doesn’t know about. This is the real purpose of the test. It is a revealing of Philip’s heart ... *to Philip*. When he is laid bare before Christ, will he ultimately pass the test by confessing Christ and trusting him to do what he says he can do?

Let’s see how Philip, the one so full of faith and belief in Chapter 1 reacts. Philip answers, “Two hundred denarii (or about eight months wages) worth of bread would not be

enough for each of them to get a little” (John 6:7). One person has called him “Philip the Statistical Pessimist.” He calculated that two thirds of a year’s wages wouldn’t be enough food to provide an afternoon tea, let alone a meal. He was very sure of what could not be done, but had no vision for what could be done. Hardheaded and practical, he thought in terms of cash.”<sup>4</sup> Now, to be fair, the way the question is put to him, you can’t really *blame* Philip for reacting this way. But that’s part of the purpose of the test. Are physical eyes enough? Why isn’t he looking at spiritual things, impossible things, especially in light of everything he has been seeing Jesus do? The heart is subtly deceptive that even in the midst of great miracles, it can’t seem to trust God. Even though he has just seen Jesus perform miracle after miracle, his mind still does not register that maybe he plans on feeding all these people in an impossible way.

Maybe you look at his response and think it perfectly legitimate. Then you read vv. 8-9. Andrew, Peter’s brother, is standing there listening to the exchange. He butts in and says, “There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish, but what are they for so many?” Why didn’t Philip think of that? Maybe he didn’t know it? Maybe he didn’t even have enough faith to bring it up?

Philip’s first response to this test is not a good one (fortunately, the test continues to the end of the chapter, and

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<sup>4</sup> Merrill C. Tenney, *John: The Gospel of Belief*, The New International Commentary on the Old and New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1976), 113.

Philip passes it, though another does not). At least Andrew brought it up. He has been called “**Andrew the Ingenious Optimist.**” Philip produced figures to show what could not be done; Andrew brought food, hoping that something might be done. To Philip, this miracle revealed Jesus’ superiority to statistical impossibilities, and to Andrew is showed that Jesus could justify any faith placed in him.<sup>5</sup>

Jesus, of course, tests our faith too. Do you believe him when he says that God will give you your daily bread? Most of us in America have not been tested in physical ways like others in the world. Yet, still, we wonder, especially if he will really do it for me in other ways. I’m in a terrible relationship, will he really help it? I have little peace with God because of my sin, will he really provide it? I have no hope for a situation I’m in, I’m in terrible physical pain because of an injury or illness, will faith in him really sustain me through it? I keep sinning against him, will he really forgive it? Eat the food of Christ *by being satisfied in what he is giving you* and find out, for he is giving you himself.

## **How to Understand the Miracle**

It’s amazing to me that Jesus doesn’t get so exasperated with his disciples, with me and with you, that he doesn’t blast it into the next world for our short-sightedness and persistent unbelief. But he doesn’t. Instead, he calmly tells them (I imagine him looking Philip dead in the eye), “**Have the people**

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

sit down.” It mentions that it was a **grassy place** and that there were **five thousand men** (**vs. 10**). Then Jesus performs one of his greatest miracles.

He took the loaves (each loaf would have looked about like a pancake) and **gave thanks** (**vs. 11**). The word “**thanks**” is the word *eucharisteō*. It is curious that Christians later called the Lord’s Supper the “**Eucharist**.” This is a later Christian term and Jesus has not officially instituted the Lord’s Supper yet. His is simply using a common word in Greek for “thanks.” Nevertheless, the whole idea of this being a new kind of Passover bread and of him being the Manna and of us needing to eat his body does help show us why Christians adopted this term for the Supper. Since it is probably the Passover a year before he dies, perhaps it could be called the “Next To The Last Supper.” It is our thankful fellowship/covenant meal God has provided to feed us. When we eat it by faith, trusting that he is supplying us with all that we need to grow in grace, then we show our thanks for the Eucharist.

Notice, the **thanks comes before the miracle**. Though we do give thanks before our own meals too, if we are honest, for most of us, the real thanks would come after the miracle. **AFTER** we see what God does, we give him thanks. But true faith gives God thanks and then trusts that he will answer. That is how the eyes of faith see things that seem impossible.

As he gave thanks, he began breaking off pieces, seemingly from his own hands. I cannot even conceptualize how this



looked. He keeps breaking the same piece of bread and it keeps returning more and more food! When I break bread, it returns **less food**. When Jesus breaks bread, he gets **more food**. Why? Because he is the **Bread of Life**. The bread points to him. In Jeremiah it says, “**My people will be filled with my bounty**” (**Jer 31:14**). He is the bounty. In the Tabernacle it was called “**the Bread of the Presence**.” It is His presence.<sup>6</sup> In Judges, it is the barley cake that rolls through the camp and levels the tent of the enemy, laying bare the unbeliever. It is because of who he is that this miracle can happen. The very laws of nature must yield to the creator of those laws.

It says that everyone ate **until they were full** and that the disciples had to **gather up the leftover fragments** “**that nothing may be lost**” (**vs. 12**). It says that there were **twelve baskets** with fragments from the five barley loaves left by those who had eaten. (**vs. 13**). The people’s response was “**This is indeed the Prophet who is come into the world**” (**vs. 14**).

Why would they have such a response as this? There are two reasons. First, it is probable that they saw Jesus as one **greater than Elisha**. Elisha was a very great prophet. Elisha performed a very similar miracle, though on a smaller scale. He fed 100 men with 20 loaves of bread (**2 Kgs 4:42-44**).

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<sup>6</sup> One could talk about the “fish” symbolism. In the Gospels, fish often represent men (fishers of men). But later, from earliest days, Christians have portrayed Christ as a fish (think of the bumper stickers). The Greek is Ichthus/Ichthys (ἰχθύς). The five letters of the Greek word became an acronym: *Iota* (i): first letter of Jesus (Ἰησοῦς); *Chi*: first letter of Christ (Χριστός); *Theta*: first letter of God (Θεοῦ); *Ypsilon*: first letter of Son (Υἱός); *Sigma*: first letter of Savior (Σωτήρ). I’m not saying Jesus had this in mind with the fish. Rather, I’m saying that Christians took the idea of the fish and made it a representation of Christ.



Jesus feeds 50x more men with 1/4 as much food. Clearly, Jesus is greater than Elisha. He is a greater prophet.

But they call him “[The Prophet](#).” Why? The Jews were in fact expecting the coming of someone called, “The Prophet.” They read Deuteronomy 18 and knew at least that much. You may think that this was a great act of faith on their part, but you would be mistaken. For they didn’t understand who this prophet really was going to be. For they did not read their whole OT as they should have. They took the bits and pieces that appealed to them and fabricated a Prophet in their own image.

[Vs. 15](#) tells us, “[Perceiving then that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, Jesus withdrew again to the mountain by himself.](#)” They wanted their prophet to be a political king, a ruler who would overthrow the Roman Empire. They [read Jesus Second Coming without caring about his First Coming](#). They wanted the glory without the cross, the divine warrior king without the suffering servant. This was actually a [sign of unbelief](#), for it shows their own inability to see their need for salvation from sin. We will see this much more clearly as the chapter unfolds in coming weeks.

Was there a way they could have avoided this problem? Yes, they could have believed in Jesus as he was presenting himself to them throughout his earthly ministry as he has done with Nicodemus, to the woman at the well, to the blind man, and so on. Sadly, Scripture tells us that both they and we are

often not willing to do this. In fact, it is the same thing their own ancestors did ... *to him*, when they rejecting him and put him to the test in the wilderness. What do I mean, and why would I bring that up here?

As I said earlier, John **gives tons of images** that harken back to an earlier painting portrayed in the Bible. This one is drawn by Moses. We are told of Moses going up on a mountain, more than once (**Ex 4:27; 19:3**, etc.). Moses went up to meet with God. Jesus is God. Jesus is the greater Moses. That's part of why he is called The Prophet, because no prophet had ever arisen than was greater than Moses (**Deut 34:10**). Their own minds are going to part of the Moses story, just not enough of it.

Moses was the one who, by the command of God, instituted the Passover (**Ex 12:43**). Jesus does this on Passover. The Passover had as its centerpiece, bread (**Ex 12:8**). Jesus asks Philip about bread. After the Passover and the miraculous signs of God in the Exodus (the people are following Jesus because of his signs), Jesus decided to test Israel just as he tests Philip now. The first test was the manna. **“Behold, I am about to rain bread from heaven for you, and the people shall go out and gather a day's portion every day, that I may test them, whether they will walk in my law or not”** (**Ex 16:4**). Part of that “law” was to **gather up** only as much as was needed, while believing that they will have just as much as they need, no more and no less. **“This is what the LORD has commanded: 'Gather of it, each one of you, as much as he can**

eat ... whoever gathered much had nothing left over, and whoever gathered little had no lack” (Ex 16:16, 18). Some of them disobeyed that test and the result was rotten stinking manna and the sharp rebuke of God. The disciples listened to Jesus when he told them not to leave any leftover that they had gathered up. In this they showed faith.

But what about the people? The twelve baskets are an obvious allusion to the twelve tribes of Israel. Each tribe had enough of Jesus’ miraculous food left over for itself. Would they believe him now or would they look to the signs and continue to want their fancies tickled, their bellies fed, and their souls empty? Would they turn to him in faith or grumble against him at the first sign of trouble? What a powerful, compassionate Savior we have. Yet, he is one that tests you today. What exactly are you looking to? What are you placing your hope in? Mostly, we place our hope in ourselves. What pitiful saviors we are. Do you trust that he will provide for your physical and spiritual needs in bounty, do you think that all those sins that make you so miserable cannot be overcome by him and that he can’t change you when you turn to him in faith and repentance? Do you refuse to test God in this, thinking that makes you some kind of spiritual person? Find those things in you that cause you unbelief, and turn to the Savior who will feed you with all you will ever need.