

WHERE ELSE?

John 6:66-69

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“As a result of this many of His disciples withdrew and were not walking with Him anymore. ⁶⁷ So Jesus said to the twelve, ‘You do not want to go away also, do you?’ ⁶⁸ Simon Peter answered Him, ‘Lord, to whom shall we go? You have words of eternal life. ⁶⁹ We have believed and have come to know that You are the Holy One of God.’” *John 6:66-69 (NASB)*

Our passage today is preceded by a monumental miracle in Jesus’ ministry. John 6 begins, so famously, with the feeding of the five thousand. One commentator has suggested that of all Jesus’ miracles, this one would have been the most impactful. It would have made the deepest impression of all the miracles performed for his generation. It is the only miracle recorded in all four gospels. In Jesus’ day, there was no one who did not understand the depths of real hunger. When they gathered up all the leftovers and saw the sign that he had performed, they were saying, “This is the prophet who is to come into the world.”

Because of this, and the miracles he had already been performing, a great multitude had begun following Jesus. So large was his following and so excited by what he had given them, John says, “They were coming by force to make him King!” (6:15)

Jesus withdraws from this kind of thing. He knows they have the wrong intentions, mistaken motives. When Jesus leaves, the crowd takes notice, and they get into boats heading for Capernaum in search of Jesus. They ask him first, “When did you get here?” What they really want is another free feast. They are captivated by the way he had filled their stomachs, and they have sought him out for the food he made.

To the multitudes motivated by the bread he had fed them, Jesus starts speaking about bread of life. To masses who know only how to think about the physical, he begins speaking also of things spiritual. To a crowd enamored by the temporal, Jesus starts speaking about the eternal.

It is as if he is saying, “I want you to so internalize me that just as you would chew on bread you take me into yourself, and I will be your very life.” They have no interest in this at all. They even argue about whether he is talking about cannibalism. It’s not that they don’t understand; they just don’t want to accept it.

“If you mean that to follow you means to incorporate you like chewing and digesting and absorbing bread so that you are more a part of us than bread itself, we’ll have nothing to do with you!”

John’s gospel has reached an impasse. John 6 brings us to the first and greatest crisis in the ministry of Jesus. John 6:60, reads: **“Therefore many of His disciples, when they heard *this* said, ‘This is a difficult statement; who can listen to it?’ But Jesus, conscious that His disciples grumbled at this, said to them, ‘Does this cause you to stumble?’”**

They were right. We all know it. Anyone who has a pulse and has seriously listened to the teachings of Jesus will, at some point, come to the same crisis. *This is a difficult statement. This is a hard teaching. Who can hear it? Who can accept it?*

Edward Klink notes that, “For some people, this is their reaction upon first hearing the message of Christ. For others, the full reality of the gospel’s claim on their life and its opposition to the value of this world do not become apparent until they have already followed Jesus for some time.” But this is the question from everyone whose flesh has ever fought against surrendering to the way of Jesus. “Jesus and his teachings,” Klink points out, “are not easily accepted by the world in its sinful pride and self-righteousness. The gospel of Jesus Christ is a foreign language to the human heart, and more often than not, its message causes us to stumble and is rejected.”ⁱ

Jesus seems to do that. He puts us in a place of conflict with the world where we must either accept or reject what he has to say. Jesus says, “Blessed are the meek,” but we question where meekness will get you in the workplace. “Blessed are the merciful,” Jesus says, but we take that only to a certain extent. Jesus says, “Blessed are the pure in heart,” but we try not to get carried away. We hear Jesus teach that, “Blessed are the peacemakers,” yet making noise and feeding conflict is so much easier. Beyond murder, its hatred you must end. Lust of the heart, not just adultery, God despises. “This is a hard teaching,” we start to say. Love your enemies. Turn the other cheek. Give to the one who asks. Who can hear these things? Who can really accept it?

Just like the large following of Jesus in John, our will comes in conflict with the will of God and we say, “Wait a minute, how far are you going, Lord?”

In that small synagogue in Capernaum, less than the size of the room in which we now gather the feet began to shuffle. Eyes lowered, and heads began to gaze at the ground. They grumbled and headed for the door. They had come this far; they had followed the miracle prophet in the countryside in awe of what he was able to do. Filled to the brim, they hurried across the lake to find him again, but, on hearing this message, they began to realize this was as far as they could go.

It’s as if they say: “You’ve made this too hard to hear. If you would make this easier, Jesus, we would stay, but you have made this too difficult. Who can hear it?”

Robert Mounce says, “Here was a decisive moment in the lives of many who were still somewhat undecided about following Jesus. His insistence that he had come down from heaven as the true bread that brings life was not something that a person could accept and, at the same time, deny that it called for a radical reorientation of life. It is one thing to consider a theological proposition and quite another to make it a conviction. Convictions have a disturbing way of changing life... The moment of truth had come, and those in whose hearts faith had not actually established itself, found it more comfortable to turn their backs on the only one who held the answer to the only really important issues in life.”ⁱⁱ

They file out, slowly at first, but then in large groups with haste. Some look back over their shoulder once more, and the synagogue goes from jam-packed to just a few. Jesus must have felt like a captain who had pushed the ship as far as it would sail. It was mutiny, desertion in the synagogue.

John 6:66 tells us that because of this, many of his disciples withdrew and were not walking with him anymore. They went back to the “behind things” and no longer walked with him. So, Jesus turns to the twelve. It’s the first time John calls the group that, “The Twelve.” He directs a question at them: **“Do you also want to go away?”** The Greek is used in a way that tells us he expected a negative answer, so most translations word it with that question at the end: **“You do not also want to go away, do you?”**

Watching the uncommitted walk away, Jesus turns to the Twelve and calls their allegiance into question. Peter steps forward, speaking on behalf of the group, and he poses his own question in return: **“Lord, to whom shall we go?”**

Where else can we go?

With their futures hanging in the balance, faced with a crisis that had already sent most of the disciples away, the Twelve are at a crossroads too. They stand in the crisis that exists for every disciple between these two questions: “Who can listen to this?” and “Where else can we go?”

Before Peter utters another word, I wonder where the minds of the other eleven went as they considered the possible answers to that question. Where else can we go? What were the options in the first-century world?ⁱⁱⁱ

Scribes – People of the Law and Interpretation

The Jews were people of the Law (the Torah). To preserve and interpret it, a new occupation was formed: the scribes. They may have begun as mere writers, but they became all about the application of the Law, figuring out how to treat any and all cases. They alone had the outrageous advantage of being able to navigate the jungle of possible scenarios and how the law applied to them - whether or not it was lawful to eat an egg laid on the Sabbath, or whether on that day of rest you could set a ladder against the house to check on a problem, or whether water poured from a clean vessel into an unclean one contaminated the source as well...

See, if you don't want to deal with the teachings of Jesus, if you'd rather not have to let his life be the very sustenance of yours, you can just spend all your time talking about the hypotheticals of his teaching.

The Pharisees – People of Personal Piety and Legalism

Because the New Testament so often highlights their clash with Jesus, the Pharisees are often dismissed as the worst types of hypocrites. This is oversimplified. The Pharisees emphasized the importance of personal religion. When worship and ritual surrounding the Temple were on the decline, the Pharisees were working to interpret the Law in a way that could make it a daily guide for the religion of the people.

All this is what led the Pharisees into the legalism. That, too, is held out to you and me. They might have been tempted to leave behind the ruler of it all so they can make it all about the rules. It's easier to be all about the rules than to have a relationship with the ruler.

The Sadducees – People of the Temple and Ritual

The Sadducees weren't having any part of this new oral or verbal law that the Pharisees were selling. They were about the written Law only. Their religion centered on the Temple. The Pharisees were making religion an intimate part of daily life, and all that innovation was too much for the first-century's firmest traditionalists. They had no openness to change, no room for a Spirit to fall from heaven, no time for a Messiah who might remake things.

If the disciples are looking for someplace else to go, they can get consumed with all that happens at the temple. Like them, we can perform every ritual and never encounter the life of the Son.

The Essenes – People of Separation and Prophecy

Several thousand Essenes lived at the time of Jesus. They rejected the Temple that they believed had fallen into the hands of unworthy priests. They became separatists, withdrawing from the unclean world and maintaining their own purity. It's not surprising they also had vivid ideas of the end of the world and were convinced they were the only ones who properly saw it.

We can disconnect from the world, withdraw when the teachings get difficult. It would be easier to huddle together and never really encounter the world. We can get consumed with theories and prophecies and forget to consume the Lord who gives bread of life.

Emperor Worship – People of Politics and Power

It didn't start with Romans, but it flourished there, too. Egypt worshiped its pharaohs; the Persians bowed before their sovereigns; the Greeks adored their heroes. These are the sources of Emperor worship in the Roman Empire. If the teaching of Jesus gets hard, you can make a god for yourself from a ruler on every corner.

Pulling at them in every direction, teachers would have been lined up to prey on the followers who disconnected themselves from their Rabbi, Jesus. These options, and countless more,

surround you as you stand between these two questions: “Who can accept this?” and “Where else can we go?”

So Peter’s question floats in the air, and the disciples glance at one another, considering for a moment. “What are our options at this point?” Before they can be distracted long by that question, Peter answers: **“You have words of eternal life. We have come to believe and to know that you are the Holy One of God.”**

It’s not that these Twelve were left with nothing else to follow and no other perspectives on life to consider. Like you, they had voices yelling in every direction about every kind of philosophy imaginable. They were pushed, like you, to take a stance on every issue that came around the corner and countless ways to live those out. Yet, with Peter, they had to remind themselves that only Jesus has words of eternal life!

An Iraqi immigrant was recently being baptized in Louisville. She had been in a Syrian refugee camp, living in spiritual fear with charms and writing all over her home to ward off bad luck and evil spirits. A Syrian Christian came to help her and said, “I have words more powerful than this,” and she handed her a New Testament.

Reinhold Niebuhr says that “Peter, the simple fisherman, could not survey the centuries which preceded, nor anticipate the experiments of the generations which followed him, yet the philosophies of the ages have not added much to his simple intuition. What Peter is saying in effect is, ‘What you demand of us is so difficult that we are almost tempted to follow the multitude in their desertion. But you have helped us to look profoundly into the meaning of life, and we are not able to find a decent alternative to your way and to your truth.’”^{iv}

We live today in a world that is starving for truth, longing for something real and trustworthy and true. Ears are listening in every direction, and a temptation of the Christian faith is to begin to think that this belief is something to be ashamed of or tentative with. The confession of Peter today comes to us in our weariness and doubt and reminds us that we stand not on shifting sands, but on the only firm foundation. We follow a Jesus who beckons us to receive the words of life, to take his teaching into ourselves with assurance and confidence that he has the words of life.

The gods of this world are perishing. They are figments of our fallen and limited imaginations. In this single question of Peter echoes the message of the Christian church, both to itself and to the world: that he alone will satisfy us. It is our testimony to the world, that we find satisfaction in Christ alone.

What the masses couldn’t see is that their vision of God was covered in sinful illusions. When Jesus pushes them to the edge, they’re revealed for who they are: a crowd focused on themselves. They don’t want the food for their souls that he himself offers. They have trusted their own stomachs instead. They have been deceived by their own desires, and they’ve missed

what really matters. When the calling of Christ clashes with their own desires, and when the cost of following him seems too great, they choose not to surrender.

Lord Nelson^v

The story of Lord Nelson, a British naval officer, is often told. He was known for having accepted the surrender of multiple foreign enemies. During the Napoleonic wars, he had defeated in battle a French admiral, who then pulled his boat alongside Nelson's and climbed aboard. As the French admiral walked the deck to surrender to Lord Nelson, he walked with his sword swaying at his side.

He walked up to Nelson and extended his hand, to which Nelson calmly and politely demanded, "First your sword, then your hand." Because, of course, a surrendering party cannot and ought not surrender with sword in hand. Surrender necessitates that we hand over defense.

The only way that Jesus can debunk the lie that your salvation and defense have never been in the thing you think is your "sword" is for him to require it of you. Then you can come to know him as your defense and him as your salvation. Many of us live our lives with a hand raised in worship and the other hand on our sword.

Jesus will ask for your sword and offer you his hand, and it is not because he is cruel or unjust, but because he demands that all of our idols bow, including those we use to protect ourselves. Many of us have been at war using these swords for a very long time. But Jesus says that if you would just lay down your sword, "I would give you my hand, my life."

"Lord, to whom shall we go? Only you have the words of life."

ⁱ Edward Klink, *Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament: John* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2016), 344.

ⁱⁱ Robert H. Mounce, *The Expositor's Bible, Vol. 10: Luke-Acts* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2007), 453.

ⁱⁱⁱ The following overview of first century Jewish sects drawn from Justo Gonzalez, "The Cradle of Christianity," *A History of Christian Thought, Vol. 1* (Abingdon Press, 1987), 29.

^{iv} Reinhold Niebuhr, "To Whom Shall We Go?" *The Christian Century*, March 10, 1927: <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/1927-03/whom-shall-we-go>

^v CS Lewis Institute, *Spiritual Discipleship*, 3. https://www.cslewisinstitute.org/Spiritual_Discipleship_page_3