

THE *Life* GIVING TABLE
experience



A guided journey of feasting through Scripture

SALLY CLARKSON
with Joel and Joy Clarkson

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e x p e r i e n c e



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The Lifegiving Table Experience: A Guided Journey of Feasting through Scripture

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Contents



Welcome to the Feast! *v*

PART 1: God Prepares a Table for Us

1. Jesus Himself Is Our Feast 3
2. God Sets a Table Every Day for Our Needs 13
3. God Nourishes and Restores Us 23
4. Now and at the End of Time 33

PART 2: We Prepare a Table for God

5. It's about the Guest, Not the Host 47
6. Taking Time to Feast in Exile 57
7. We Invite Jesus to Transform Us 67
8. Duty or Delight? 77

PART 3: We Prepare a Table for Others

9. A Feast in the Presence of Enemies 91
10. A Table of Anticipation 103
11. Food for the Unfed 113
12. United by God's Provision 123

Notes 132

About the Authors 133

Welcome to the Feast!



*He satisfies the thirsty
and fills the hungry with good things.*

PSALM 107:9

In all the years that the Clarksons have been a family, feasting together has been a lifegiving activity for us. And we've always *called* it feasting, whether it involves a full-blown banquet, a one-on-one treat of milk and cookies, or a bowl of fresh-popped popcorn around the fire. The word reminds us of God's bounty, the gift of our relationships, and the response of pleasure and thanksgiving that the act of sharing a meal requires of us.

It's no accident that many of our formative and memorable moments over the years have occurred around our various family tables. When my husband, Clay, and I started our family, we were determined to use the family table not only as a source of nourishment, but as a discipling tool and a place to strengthen our bonds of love and belonging. Over

the years, as we enjoyed (mostly) healthy, delicious, and satisfying food, we also thrived on lifegiving conversation and a steady diet of Scripture shared around the table.

Such scriptural nourishment is at the heart of this guided study. It is intended as a companion to *The Lifegiving Table*, a book I wrote about how feasting together shaped our family and our shared mission. So rather than focusing on our own story here, we invite you to join us in the experience of feasting on the Word and exploring the scriptural impact of the lifegiving table.

The twelve chapters explore different aspects of food, drink, and celebration in both our physical and our spiritual lives. In each you'll find

- *A pertinent passage (or passages) from Scripture.* We encourage you to feast on it first, savoring it slowly, before moving on.
- *Setting the Table—an imaginative retelling of the passage and a meditation on its meaning.* We've written each of these in a way we hope will make you feel as if you are stepping into the pages of Scripture and experiencing the scenes firsthand. Please keep in mind that we are storytellers and not formal theologians. So any imaginative elements in these stories are not meant to be a statement of how each story *actually* unfolded, but rather our notion of how it *might* have played out. Though we have attempted to be painstakingly attentive to the accuracy of Scripture, we have also

WELCOME TO THE FEAST!

carefully and respectfully used imagery and dialogue that aren't explicitly stated in Scripture. While we hope you enjoy our take on these passages, we encourage you to go back for second helpings to get familiar with the source material yourself and learn the stories straight from Scripture.

- *Table Talk—Conversation Starters.* These are brief questions designed to break the ice in a group study and stimulate both personal reflection and lively discussion.
- *Table Talk—Digging Deeper.* These sections point you toward related Scripture passages and additional questions meant to offer a broader perspective and help you consider the theme of the chapter in greater depth. We've left space in this section for you to jot down your thoughts and ideas, but you can use a separate notebook or journal if you prefer. This section is appropriate for discussion in the group or for individuals to complete later.

There are many possible ways to use this book. While originally envisioned as a twelve-week small-group study, it also will work well for individuals or couples. To enrich the experience, we recommend sharing it over a meal!

As you take this guided journey along with us, we hope you'll take advantage of this opportunity to “hear . . . , mark, learn, and inwardly digest”¹ the nourishing words of Scripture God has provided for us and to truly “taste and

THE LIFEGIVING TABLE EXPERIENCE

see that the LORD is good” (Psalm 34:8). We pray that you will find both strength and sustenance as you explore what it means to feast at the Lord’s Lifegiving Table.

Bon appétit!

Sally Clarkson



PART I

God Prepares a Table for Us



JESUS HIMSELF IS OUR FEAST

As they were eating, Jesus took some bread and blessed it. Then he broke it in pieces and gave it to the disciples, saying, "Take it, for this is my body."

And he took a cup of wine and gave thanks to God for it. He gave it to them, and they all drank from it. And he said to them, "This is my blood, which confirms the covenant between God and his people. It is poured out as a sacrifice for many. I tell you the truth, I will not drink wine again until the day I drink it new in the Kingdom of God."

MARK 14:22-25

Setting the Table

It was dusk. A subdued quiet had begun to settle over Jerusalem with the impending arrival of the Passover. But in their private room, the evening had begun with festivities. The disciples were exuberant and animated, reflecting on the happenings of the week.

When they entered Jerusalem, Jesus had been hailed as a

coming hero. Some had even called Him a king—a politically loaded word in Roman-occupied Judea if there ever was one. The hint of rebellion and its resulting punishment might have struck fear in their hearts if not for the ecstasy of that moment—the people, waving branches and smiling, looking up in admiration at the little entourage, calling out to Jesus with words of exaltation. It had been too thrilling to let the fear of what might be ruin the enjoyment of the moment.

Now it was Passover, and in the convergence of that holy Jewish feast with their moment of triumph, their hearts rose in celebration for God’s faithfulness to them, faithfulness that they were seeing manifest in their lives day by day.

Only those few with a keen eye could see that the Master seemed removed from the festivities, preoccupied and distant. Philip and Andrew saw it. They had been there with that group of Greek scholars when Jesus suddenly began to speak of death, of a grain falling into the ground and dying. It had seemed odd, out of place with the excitement of the moment. People were praising His name in the streets, but He was talking about being “lifted up”—an unsettling phrase tinged with ominous undertones. Now, as everyone jostled around and chatted about the common gossip in Jerusalem, Jesus had stepped into a different room. It seemed odd that He wasn’t sharing in their happiness, given His usual spirited participation in their meals together. But the disciples quickly forgot about this and became caught up in conversation. As soon as Jesus returned, the mood of the room began

to change. He had stripped away His outer garments and was dressed in the garb of a lowly servant. He carried a basin of water, which He placed at the feet of Bartholomew, and a towel. A hush settled over the gathered group, with only surprised whispers shared between several of the men present.

Was the Master really going to stoop to washing their feet, an action appropriate only for the most humble of household servants? It seemed completely out of place for a man so highly favored. It didn't make sense, but then much of what the Master did was confusing. Perhaps this was just one of His eccentric ways of teaching them one of His truths about the Kingdom of Heaven. So one by one they submitted to this puzzling ritual. Only Peter objected, and Jesus' response to Peter stole away any sense in the group that the evening would be a normal Passover celebration. "Unless I wash you, you won't belong to Me."

Something significant was happening; they could all feel it in the air. When the Master spoke in such a tone, everyone listened closely. As they waited to see what would happen next, Jesus' troubling words from the previous days began to seep back into their consciousness. *You will not always have Me. . . . Unless a kernel of wheat is planted in the soil and dies. . . .* Then He spoke again, and His words cut them like a knife: "One of you will betray Me!"

Betrayal? Who would even think of such a thing? Incredulity and fear began to weave through the threads of their thought. Surely no one would ever give up the Master. He was their Lord. He had brought them life. And yet now

Jesus had all but accused Judas, and Judas, for his part, was slinking away from the group.

Now the fear truly set in. Mere moments before, they had enjoyed the leisure of one another's company, basking in the excitement of the week. Now nothing seemed sure. No one had thought that highly of Judas anyway, but to betray the Master—anything might happen now. A shadow of worry gathered over the group, and they ate in silence.

It was Jesus who broke the quiet. He started to pray, holding up the unleavened bread for the Passover meal. And when He finished His blessing, He began to pass the bread around. "Take it," He said, "for this is My body."

The disciples were simple men, by and large—not respected scholars or leaders in the synagogue. But like all faithful Jews, they understood the significance of the Passover bread. They knew it represented God's provision for their ancestors as they fled Egypt, nourishment for their most basic needs. And now Jesus was associating Himself with that holy symbol. They knew Jesus was sent from God, but this was radically beyond anything they could have imagined.

They had little time to consider this revolutionary notion; Jesus was now blessing the wine. "This is My blood, which confirms the covenant between God and His people."

All of them could sense in their hearts that this was no normal Passover feast. Something larger was at work. In time, the disciples would come to understand that the story of their redemption as Jews was being woven into a larger story, one of a King who had come to suffer and, through that

suffering, to triumph over the darkness of the world. And yet, in that early moment, the scope of that story was still unclear to the disciples. They couldn't see the bigger picture and were fearful in that unknowing.

Still, they partook of Jesus' meal. They ate and drank as He asked them. And somehow, in the eating of that bread and the drinking of that wine, a new peace came into their hearts, a peace that transcended understanding. A peace that soothed their anxious spirits the way the bread and wine soothed their hungry bellies.

A peace that somehow contained the redemption of the whole world.

Today, just as in Jesus' time, the world around us feels uncertain, full of danger and sorrow. Like the disciples, who would soon witness Jesus' crucifixion and burial, we will also almost certainly face trouble in the course of our lives. The ground beneath our feet seems to be constantly changing, at one moment firm as rock and at another rolling like waves in a storm. What Jesus longed for His disciples to comprehend, just as He longs for us to understand today, is that when everything around us changes, He is our hope and help. He gives His very self, body and soul, for us. It is He who sustains us and brings us peace.

Jesus wants us to hear the same words that His disciples heard that fateful night so long ago: "In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world" (John 16:33, NIV). Everything may fall apart around us, but we have a God who has stepped into our time and space,

shared our sorrows, and taken them on to Himself. He has made Himself the provision we need in our most difficult moments, not sending down rays of hope from faraway heaven, but walking with us in our suffering.

When we are starved for hope, Jesus gives Himself as our meal. And when we eat of that bread, nothing can remove from us the peace and satisfaction we find there.

Table Talk

CONVERSATION STARTERS

1. Why do you think it was important for Jesus to personally serve His disciples by washing their feet before the meal?
2. What does it mean to you that Jesus offered His peace to the disciples in the context of a meal?
3. Think of a time when you felt starved of hope. How did that situation resolve (if it did)? What else—besides peace—have you been hungry for?
4. What practical steps can you take to invite God's peace into your own mealtimes—and the rest of your lives?

DIGGING DEEPER

1. *“I am leaving you with a gift—peace of mind and heart. And the peace I give is a gift the world cannot give. So don't be troubled or afraid”* (JOHN 14:27).

JESUS HIMSELF IS OUR FEAST

- a. What is the peace that the world gives—and how is Jesus' peace different? What kind of peace can the world not provide? Write down three different ways in which God's peace transcends worldly peace.

 - b. If Jesus' peace is something the world cannot provide, then it must be a sort of centeredness that isn't changed by life status or circumstances. Have you ever experienced that kind of peace? Think about or describe the circumstances. What would have to happen for you to experience that kind of peace in your life right now?
-
2. *“Don't worry about anything; instead, pray about everything. Tell God what you need, and thank him for all he has done. Then you will experience God's peace, which exceeds anything we can understand. His peace will guard your hearts and minds as you live in Christ Jesus”* (PHILIPPIANS 4:6-7).
 - a. In this verse are two actions we must take to partake of God's peace. The first is to tell Him what we need. Even though He knows our needs already, actually

THE LIFE-GIVING TABLE EXPERIENCE

communicating them opens our hearts to receive His provision. Write down at least three current sources of worry in your life.

- b. The second necessary action for experiencing God's peace is to thank Him for what He has done—articulating the ways He has been faithful in the past. We must reach into the past story of our journey with Jesus, take from that story the elements of God's faithfulness, and cast them into our current anxieties and future uncertainties. Write down one or two times (if any) in which you have experienced God's faithfulness in the past.

- c. Using the two lists you have made, write down or say out loud a prayer for God's peace. Take a minute or two when you are through to meditate on the reality of God's nourishing peace. Then reflect: What was this experience like for you?

3. *“Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself unless it abides in the vine, so neither can you unless you abide in Me. I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in Me and I in him, he bears much fruit, for apart from Me you can do nothing”*
(JOHN 15:4-5, NASB).

- a. Just as a vine spreads the nutrition it absorbs from the earth into each and every living branch, so Christ channels nourishment from the Father to us. Jesus longs for us to know Him as intimately as a branch knows the vine to which it is attached, depending on Him for our very lives. Abiding in Jesus is an act of complete reliance, an acknowledgment that we cannot live or flourish apart from Him, any more than a severed branch can grow and bloom. Do you think you abide in Christ this way? Why or why not? What is the difference between abiding in Him and simply being passive in life?
- b. We all need food and drink to survive physically, and in our spiritual lives we need the sustenance of the Spirit. Such “food” comes to us in all sorts of strange and wonderful ways: through the kindness of friends and family, in the beauty of a blazing

sunset, in the gentle caress of music on our ears, in the words of Scripture, in the savory goodness of a lovingly prepared meal. What kind of experiences tend to feed your spirit? How can you put yourself in a position to receive the spiritual nourishment you need?

- c. The proper response to a good meal prepared for you is enjoyment, appreciation, and thanksgiving. What does that tell you about the appropriate way to respond to Christ's gift of Himself for our nourishment? How can you best express your enjoyment of Him, your appreciation for His gifts to you, and your gratitude for His sustaining grace? Prayer is an important possibility, of course, but are there others?