

Discussion Guide: *Babette's Feast*

NOTE: THIS GUIDE CONTAINS SPOILERS

This guide explores Gabriel Axel's Academy Award-winning film *Babette's Feast* (based on the short story by Karen Blixen, written under her pseudonym Isak Dinesen). It is a profoundly moving story about grace and the transformative power of hospitality!

Highlights

As you watch, notice these moments:

- Pay attention to the atmosphere of the village at the beginning, reflected in the scenery and sound of the setting (the gray colors and the quiet singing). How does the environment reflect their spiritual life?
- Notice how Babette makes her new home in the community after fleeing Paris. She serves quietly for 14 years without demanding anything in return. What things does she do? How does she adjust to the Puritanical lifestyle in the household of Martina and Philippa?
- At the feast itself, look at the reactions of the villagers as the courses and wines are served. How does the food slowly allow them to let their defenses down? How do their initial apprehensions about the supposed "sinfulness" of enjoying such extravagant foods make way for pure joy and communion with each other?

Discussion

1. Babette spends her entire lottery winnings (10,000 francs) to prepare a meal that costs a fortune, asking for nothing in return except that they let her cook it in honor of the one-hundredth anniversary of the birth of Martina and Philippa's father.

- How does Babette's gift embody the free and unearned nature of grace? Why are the villagers, and especially the sisters, hesitant to enjoy the meal?

2. Babette was once a master chef in Paris; she was truly a culinary artist. In this remote Danish village, her art was much more hidden, yet she gave her absolute best in preparing this feast for a group who barely understood it or her.

- What does the film say about the purpose of art and beauty? Are they trivial/frivolous (or even sinful, like how the sisters think it would be sinful to enjoy all the delicacies at Babette's feast)? Or, can they be profound acts of service (and worship)?

3. The village is full of bitterness, old grievances, and broken relationships. By the end of the feast, villagers are holding hands, singing, and forgiving one another! General Löwenhielm says

of Babbette, "This woman, this head chef had the ability to transform a dinner into a kind of love affair...a love affair that made no distinction between bodily appetite and spiritual appetite."

- How does the physical act of breaking bread together break down spiritual and emotional walls? How does this presentation of the table as a place of transformation help us think about tables (and the Table, or Holy Communion) as a place of transformation for individuals and communities?

4. When others realize Babbette has spent her entire fortune and has nothing left for herself, Babbette replies, "An artist is never poor."

- What does she mean by this? How does giving away everything she had to create something beautiful reflect a deeper understanding of wealth?

Quick Scripture Connections

- **On Feasting and the Kingdom:** *Isaiah 25:6* ("On this mountain the Lord Almighty will prepare a feast of rich food for all peoples..."); Matthew 22:1-14 and the Parable of the Wedding Feast; Luke 24:13-35 and the meal at the end of the Road to Emmaus.
- **On Generosity:** John 12, where Mary of Bethany pours costly perfume on Jesus' feet.
- **On Artistry and Excellence:** *Ecclesiastes 3:12-13* ("I know that there is nothing better for people than to be happy and to do good while they live. That each of them may eat and drink, and find satisfaction in all their toil—this is the gift of God.")

For a good discussion of the symbolism and artistry of this movie, check out this video:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DmqbmfEO27I>