

FEEDING FIVE THOUSAND

John 6:1-15

*The afflicted shall eat and be satisfied;
Those who seek Him will praise the LORD.
Let your heart live forever! (Psalm 22:26).*

Of all the miracles performed by Jesus aside from His resurrection, there is only one that is recorded in all four of the gospel accounts. It is the miracle of the feeding of the five thousand. This was an especially significant miracle. It was significant because, of all the miracles that Jesus performed, this one involved the most participants and had the most eye witnesses. Of all His miracles, this one had the most in volume. The only other miracle that ever came close was the turning of the water into wine. Perhaps it is significant that these two emblems, the bread and the wine, are used in the Lord's Supper. It is on the aftermath of this miracle that John records the words of Jesus:

⁵³ Jesus therefore said to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you have no life in yourselves. ⁵⁴ He who eats My flesh and drinks My blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day. ⁵⁵ For My flesh is true food, and My blood is true drink. ⁵⁶ He who eats My flesh and drinks My blood abides in Me, and I in him." (John 6:53-56).

This suggests that the miracle of the feeding of the five thousand, while a historical fact and a faith-producing miracle, can also be further seen as a type and a picture of the salvation into which we have entered. In the same way that He produced food for the people to nourish themselves, so also His salvation gives to us spiritual nourishment.

It is interesting to note the location for this miracle. It took place in a time of retreat; a time when Jesus was seeking to get away from it all.

RETREAT TO A LONELY PLACE

After these things Jesus went away to the other side of the Sea of Galilee (or Tiberias). (John 6:1).

John's focus up to this point has been primarily upon the ministry of Jesus in Judea. He has mentioned Galilee on several occasions, but little space has thus far been given to the Galilean ministry. That changes as we come to this chapter. As we read of His ministry in Galilee, we must remember that Jesus had already experienced considerable ministry in

this area. He had gone from Nazareth to Cana and then down to Capernaum on the northeastern shore of the Sea of Galilee. The towns in this area had seen lepers cleansed and blind given sight. They had seen lame walk and deaf regain their hearing. The number of His disciples had grown to a core group of twelve men as the multitudes came to hear Him preach.

It is at this time that Jesus takes His disciples away from the crowds and the multitudes to a "lonely place." Why did Jesus pick this time to leave? We would have thought this to be a prime opportunity to build His church. His ministry is increasing. He is big news. His teachings have made the front page of the Herodian Herald. This would seem a good time to start a new building program and to expand His ministry even further. Instead, we see Jesus pulling back from ministry.

Why did Jesus pick this time to leave? I believe there are several reasons for this timely retreat.

1. Jesus is putting Himself out of Herod's reach and from the prying eyes of His enemies. Herod has already put John into prison and ultimately to death. It will be this same Herod who will sit in judgment of Jesus on the day of His crucifixion. The time of Jesus has not yet come to go to the cross and Jesus will not permit an untimely confrontation to take place between Himself and Herod Antipas.
2. Jesus wishes to be alone for a time. His cousin, John, has been murdered. They are the same age. They share the same ministry. Of all His physical relatives, none has ever understood Him and shared His vision and His ministry the way John has done. John has believed in Jesus even when the brothers of Jesus did not believe. They have been linked together in a common bond from birth and before.

Now John is gone. His execution seems almost pointless. And so, it is natural to see Jesus taking time to express His grief.

3. A third reason for this retreat is described in Mark's account. It is for the sake of the disciples of Jesus: *And the apostles gathered together with Jesus; and they reported to Him all that they had done and taught. ³¹ And He said to them, "Come away by yourselves to a lonely place and rest a while." (For there were many people coming and going, and they did not even have time to eat). (Mark 6:30-31).*

This was to be a time of refreshing for the disciples. They have been under the pressure of constant ministry and they need time to recharge.

Have you ever faced the problem of burn-out? What do you do when you cannot do anymore? Sometimes you need to get away so that you can recharge. You need to go to a lonely place. You will find Jesus waiting for you there.

SETTING FOR A SUPPER

2 And a great multitude was following Him, because they were seeing the signs which He was performing on those who were sick. 3 And Jesus went up on the mountain, and there He sat with His disciples. 4 Now the Passover, the feast of the Jews, was at hand. (John 6:2-4).

It was one thing for Jesus and His disciples to make plans to get away from the multitudes. It was quite another thing for those plans to be put into effect. They got away from the crowds, but the crowds did not get away from them.

Jesus had been preparing to take a rest. But in the midst of those plans, there is an interruption. He had to put off the rest because of the people whom God was sending to Him.

If you are like me, then when you came to Christ you told Him that you were ready to lay down your life on His behalf - to stand before the world and proclaim His glory - to give all for His service - even to be a martyr for the cause of Christ. But that is not where real commitment is usually called from. Very few of us will be called to die a martyr's death.

Real commitment lies in following Christ while frustrated and inconvenienced. You say you are willing to give up your life for Christ - but are you willing to give up your Saturday afternoon for Him?

In Matthew 25 Jesus gives a vivid picture of the last judgment. He says that when you didn't reach out to people around you, it was Jesus whom you were really ignoring.

1. The Following Multitude: *And a great multitude was following Him (6:2).*

What attracted the multitude? Was it the sinless character of Jesus? Was it the depth of His teaching? Was it His call to repentance? I do not think so. I think that most of these people were attracted by the miracles. The passage tells us this. It says they were following *because they were seeing the signs which He was performing on those who were sick (6:2).*

There is a lesson here. It is that when you are only impressed by the dramatic, then when the drama stops, you will cease to be impressed. Jesus is going to do a miracle today and people will flock to Him. He will do no miracles tomorrow and only the Twelve will remain.

What is it that drew you to Jesus? Was it the superficial? If it is and if that is all that continues to appeal to you, then it will not last and neither will you.

In this case, they followed Jesus as long as they did what they wanted Him to do. But have you ever done that? You prayed to Him and you said, "Lord, if you will answer this prayer, then I will obey you and be more committed to you."

That is awful. If the King does not do what the subjects want Him to do, that is no reflection on the kingship of the King. It is a reflection on the disobedience and the rebellion of the subjects. The test of maturity is when He says, "NO" to your prayers and you continue to follow Him.

2. The Proximity of the Passover: *Now the Passover, the feast of the Jews, was at hand (6:4).*

John is careful to tell us that this miracle was performed on the occasion of a coming Passover. When the Jews were preparing to observe a historic feast, Jesus provided them with a miraculous feast. We are told this for a reason. We are meant to see a similarity between these events and the events of the first Passover.

The Passover	The Bread of Life
Instituted by Moses	Jesus is a greater than Moses
Involved the eating of a meal and a supernatural deliverance	Produces a supernatural meal in the feeding of the 5000
The Israelites are led through the Red Sea	Jesus delivers His disciples from a storm on the Sea of Galilee
The Lord sustains Israel with manna in the wilderness	Jesus is the bread of life who sustains those who believe in Him.

Notice that Jesus goes *up on the mountain*. I do not know which mountain is in view. The fact that He goes from this mountain to the Sea of Galilee on that very evening suggests that it is one of the hills that surrounds that lake.

What was the purpose of going atop such a hill? We are not told, but it seems to me to be reminiscent of Moses going atop Mount Sinai to receive the law from God. Jesus could have made it easy for the people. He could have gone into their villages and towns. Instead, we read of him going out

There is a great deal within this chapter that is designed to make us compare Jesus with Moses.

- The previous chapter closes with a reference to the witness of Moses.
- The reaction to the miracle of the feeding of the 5,000 will be that people will identify Jesus as "The Prophet," the one who would be like Moses.
- Jesus will eventually contrast Himself with Moses and how Moses gave manna while He gives the true bread from heaven (John 6:32).

to a high place so that, if they were going to hear Him and see Him, they would also have to make such a journey.

God does that with us. He takes us out of our comfort zone and He calls us to a journey. It is a journey of faith. It involves following Him and it involves hearing His instructions, even when they seem impossible to keep.

AN IMPOSSIBLE REQUEST

Jesus therefore lifting up His eyes, and seeing that a great multitude was coming to Him, said to Philip, "Where are we to buy bread, that these may eat?" 6 And this He was saying to test him; for He Himself knew what He was intending to do. (John 6:5-6).

Imagine the scene. Jesus and His disciples have left the seaside city of Capernaum and have made their way eastward into the domain of Philip in the hilly region known today as the Golan Heights. A crowd soon gathers.

If you read this and think of it in terms of a Sunday picnic, then you have missed the point. It would be better to liken this to the scene of a rock concert where the organizers are told that there are no toilet facilities. There are thousands of people who have come. They have left the comfort of their homes and they have traveled from far and wide to see Jesus. It is at such a time that Jesus asks a question. He directs this question to Philip.

You remember Philip. His conversion is described in the first chapter of John. He is the one who met Jesus and who immediately went and found Nathanael and proclaimed to him that they had found the One of whom Moses and the prophets wrote (John 1:45). Philip had brought Nathanael to meet Jesus. When we come to John 12:21, we will again see Philip and he will be doing the same thing -- he will be bringing people to meet Jesus.

Jesus asks Philip a question. It is a test question. Jesus is testing Philip. Jesus already knows the answer to the question. He understands that this situation has taken place exactly for this purpose. He knows that Philip does not know this. The test is not of Philip's knowledge. The test is of Philip's faith. More specifically, the test is designed to help Philip grow his faith.

This is noteworthy because the problem itself does not seem to be a very spiritual problem. It appears to be a very practical problem. Jesus asks, "Where are we to buy bread to feed the multitude? Is there a local MacDonalds where we can pick up some fast food?" There is a lesson here. It is that practical problems often have spiritual ramifications.

Notice also that there is a presupposition of responsibility undertaken by Jesus. By His question, He is assuming a responsibility for the welfare of the multitude. If I had been Philip, I might have been tempted to ask, "Why is it our job to feed all of these people? We did not ask them to come. We were trying to get away from it all and these freeloaders showed up on our doorstep. Why should we worry about whether or not they eat?" The question is the same one that Cain asked when he queried, "Am I my brother's keeper?"

The truth is that you really ARE your brother's keeper. If Jesus is concerned about feeding hungry people, then perhaps we ought to be concerned about it, too.

AN ADMISSION OF HELPLESSNESS

Philip answered Him, "Two hundred denarii worth of bread is not sufficient for them, for everyone to receive a little." (John 6:7).

A denarius was a small silver coin. Its name literally meant "a ten piece." It took ten copper coins to make a single denarius. This was the typical wage for a common laborer. I don't know that Philip had a background in accounting, but he does a quick head count and does some quick multiplication and he can see that this is not going to work. Even if they had the money (which they do not), they cannot run down to the local Burger King and order 5,000 hamburgers. It will not be enough.

Philip has been placed into an impossible situation. He is brought to despair so that he can see the inadequacy of his own resources. He does the same thing with us. Why? Because until you come to the place where you recognize your own powerlessness, you cannot be a channel of the power of the Lord.

I did not say that. The Bible did. This was the same thing Paul learned when he went to the Lord and asked that his thorn in the flesh be removed. The Lord refused, telling him, "*My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness*" (2 Corinthians 12:9). Paul could not have accomplished the things he did if he was depending upon his own strength and power. It is only as he trusted in the Lord that he became a channel of the power of God. Have you come to the point of recognizing your own spiritual helplessness?

AN AVAILABLE RESOURCE

One of His disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, said to Him, "There is a lad here who has five barley loaves and two fish, but what are

these for so many people?" (John 6:8-9).

From Philip, we move to Andrew. Andrew was the brother of Simon Peter. We saw him introduced in the first chapter of John when he brought his brother to Jesus. Everyone has heard of Peter and it seems likely that Andrew lived in the shadow of his brother. Yet there is something wonderfully compelling about Andrew. If Philip served as the accountant for the disciples, Andrew seems to have served as their minister of outreach. Every time we see Andrew, he is bringing someone to Jesus.

- In John 1 he brings his brother Simon to the Lord.
- Here he brings a young boy to Jesus.
- In John 12 he will be seen bringing some Greeks to Jesus.

Not everyone can be a Peter. Not everyone will be a spokesman, having just the right words to say all the time. If you cannot be a Peter, then be an Andrew. Determine that you will always be available to bring someone to Jesus.

Andrew does this. He brings this boy to Jesus. The Lord has been discussing the problem of food with Philip and as Andrew looks about to see what can be done about it, he comes up with a partial answer. It is a young boy with his lunch bag.

1. *Five barley loaves.*

These were bagels without the holes in the middle. They were not even whole wheat bread. They were made of barley. They were made of the cheapest available ingredients.

2. *Two fish.*

The usual word for "fish" is ἰχθῦς. This is not the word that is used here. Instead we are told that he had two οὐαρία. This refers to small fish about the size of sardines. They had likely been cooked and dried. They would be used as a paste to spread over the bread to make a poor boy's fish sandwich.

There is something unsaid here that I think is clearly implied. It is that this boy gave his lunch to Jesus. Andrew did not wrestle it away from him. He came willingly. He would have been as hungry as the rest of the multitude. The only difference between himself and them is that he had planned ahead for his need. He was willing to part with his lunch and give it to Jesus.

There are several lessons we can learn from this unknown boy. The first is that the greatest accomplishments in life are often the result of the surrender of the least gifted people. This boy was not a great person by any standards of the day. He did not have a

seminary education. There was no long string of degrees behind his name. He did not even have a great deal of food. But what he had, he was willing to give to Jesus.

This brings us to a second lesson. It is that when you give up what you have for Jesus and it is not enough, He makes up the difference. The spiritual gifts and abilities that you have are the ones you were supposed to have. If they are not sufficient for the task you have, then you have not been called to complete that task. This boy did not have enough to feed every hungry person in Palestine. That is okay because he was not called to do that.

A third lesson is seen in the observation that this boy got so much more than he ever would have had he kept his lunch to himself. He gave it up to Jesus. He lost control over it. From a human standpoint, he ran the risk of going hungry. From a divine standpoint, it was not a risk at all. In the end, he got to eat much more than he ever would have eaten if he had held onto his lunch.

That is the pattern for all spiritual life. It is the pattern for our very salvation. If you hold onto control and seek to be saved through your own efforts, you will ultimately lose your life. But if you relinquish control and entrust yourself to Christ, admitting your own helplessness, you will find that He is the one who saves the helpless.

THE MIRACULOUS FEEDING

Jesus said, "Have the people sit down." Now there was much grass in the place. So the men sat down, in number about five thousand. ¹¹ Jesus therefore took the loaves; and having given thanks, He distributed to those who were seated; likewise also of the fish as much as they wanted. (John 6:10-11).

The miracle is presented in all of its basic simplicity. The heavens did not open. Trumpets did not sound. There were no angels doing crash dives dropping bread into the laps of the people. We are not told how Jesus brought this miracle about. He simply began to give out food and there was enough for all to eat.

At the same time, we cannot help but note that the miracle was performed and the bread and fish were distributed through the agency of the disciples. They are the ones who gave the instructions for the people to be seated. They evidently were the ones who were used to distribute the loaves and the fish.

The Lord calls for our participation in His spiritual work. It is not that we are so capable. We are no more able to bring about spiritual fruit than the disciples were able to conjure up bread and fish out of thin air. But we are nevertheless permitted to have a ministry in

dispensing that which God has supernaturally given.

THE MANY FRAGMENTS

And when they were filled, He said to His disciples, "Gather up the leftover fragments that nothing may be lost." ¹³ And so they gathered them up, and filled twelve baskets with fragments from the five barley loaves, which were left over by those who had eaten. (John 6:12-13).

Why did Jesus order the fragments to be gathered up? Some have suggested that this is a lesson that we should not waste that which God has given to us. I think the real reason was for the sake of the disciples. How many baskets were there? There were twelve. How many disciples were there? There were twelve.

Jesus had provided, not only for the multitude, but for His disciples as well. They had wondered where they would get enough to feed the multitude when they did not have enough to feed themselves. They may have thought, "If we give up that which has been given to us by this little boy, then we will have to go hungry." Instead of going hungry, each disciple ended up with a load of food.

That is not all. The next part of this chapter will see the disciples on the Sea of Galilee during a storm. They will be afraid. The boat will be in danger of sinking. Jesus will not be with them, but something else will be with them. Twelve baskets of leftovers will be there as a reminder of the power and the provision of God.

The disciples are being taught a lesson. It is a lesson we also need to learn. It is that Jesus is sufficient for our needs. It is one thing to believe in Jesus for my eternal life, but have I also learned to trust Him to provide for tomorrow's lunch?

A story is told of the famous explorer missionary, Dr. David Livingston. He is reported to have suffered a medical condition in which he was required to drink goat's milk. The story goes that he was praying one morning and he told the Lord, "Everything I have is yours, Lord."

The Lord has a way of putting such a prayer to the test and Livingston was visited that same week by a tribal chief and he noticed the chief taking note of his goat. Desiring to show God's love in action, he took the goat and presented it to the chief. In return, the chief presented him with the wooden staff he had been carrying.

Later that day, Livingston confided in one of his friends, "I don't know why I was so reckless as to give away my goat. All I have to show for this is this stick." His friend replied, "You don't understand. That is not just a stick; it is the tribal scepter. You no

longer just own one goat; you now own all the goats in the village.”

When we have given everything we have to the Lord, we find that He has given us a scepter. We have been walking around ever since, thinking it is just a stick.

REASON FOR A SECOND RETREAT

When therefore the people saw the sign which He had performed, they said, "This is of a truth the Prophet who is to come into the world." 15 Jesus therefore perceiving that they were intending to come and take Him by force, to make Him king, withdrew again to the mountain by Himself alone. (John 6:14-15).

Upon seeing the miracle of the multiplied bread and fish, the reaction of the people is to recognize Jesus as “the Prophet.” This is a reference to the Old Testament prophecy in Deuteronomy 18:15 that promised the coming of a prophet who would be like Moses. These Jews come to the conclusion that Jesus is the fulfillment of that prophecy. Were they right? Yes, they were. Jesus is indeed the second Moses who brought, not the law, but grace and truth to men.

In light of that fact, it is quite startling to read of the reaction of Jesus to the thoughts and intents of the crowd. He departed. He left the area. He withdrew from the multitude.

Why is this? You would have thought that He would take this opportunity to lead this new group of converts into His teachings, helping them to grow in their understanding of His kingdom. Instead, He leaves. Why does He leave them?

It is because they are not willing to accept Him on His terms. They want to follow a Messiah who will be a conquering king and who can give them free food on demand. When He tells them that He is the bread of life and that they must come to Him to be forgiven, they will leave.

Jesus does not allow people to accept Him on their own terms. You cannot think of Jesus in the comfortable way in which you would like and then expect Him to fit into your own privately conceived mold. You must accept Him as He is.

They want to make Him a king by force of arms. They have missed the fact that He is already the King of kings. You do not make Jesus into a king; you can only recognize His kingship.

There is coming a day when Jesus will indeed be recognized as King. When it happens, it will not be by force of arms or at the hands of an unruly mob. His kingdom is not of this

world and the citizens of His kingdom are not of this world. You must come to Him on His own terms and bow before Him.