

12. Jesus Feeds Five Thousand

John 6:1-15

The Gospel According to John

As we have walked with John over the many miles of the Jerusalem area and the Galilee, one thing we have seen demonstrated again and again is that Jesus is not only 100% man but also 100% God. The first three Gospels focus more on the works and teaching of Jesus; whereas, John focuses more on *Who Jesus is*. In chapter 5, we saw Jesus heal the invalid at the Pool of Bethesda. Words of teaching followed that illuminated to us that Jesus is, indeed, God in the flesh.

In chapter 6, we see the same thing, i.e., a miracle and then teaching about the Lord Jesus related to the miracle on a spiritual level. Jesus feeding the five thousand is significant because all four Gospels record this miracle. We must ask ourselves as to why all four Gospels share this miracle. The first reason is that this miracle supplies those who are wavering in faith with much evidence, namely the number of people that did not just witness it but were a part of it by eating what came only from a boy's packed lunch. Secondly, this wasn't just restorative healing, but a miracle in which the Lord created good food that wasn't there before. Thirdly, the miracle spoke of Who Jesus is, viz. the same One Who gave them bread from heaven, the manna, but more than that, He is the heavenly bread that has come down and satisfies the soul of man.

The Where and When of the Miracle

¹Some time after this, Jesus crossed to the far shore of the Sea of Galilee (that is, the Sea of Tiberias), ²and a great crowd of people followed him because they saw the miraculous signs he had performed on the sick. ³Then Jesus went up on a mountainside and sat down with his disciples. ⁴The Jewish Passover Feast was near (John 6:1-4).

Some time had passed since the healing of the man by the Pool of Bethesda (v. 1). John now puts before his readers the next picture of Christ, i.e., the miracle of the feeding of the five thousand. The vast crowd was not yet believers, but they were hungry to see something that would give them some hope and alleviate their sicknesses (v. 2). John writes that the Jewish Passover feast was near (v. 4), which could explain why many people were on the road and why men were not at their regular employ. Perhaps, they were readying themselves for the trip toward Jerusalem for the Passover Feast, one of three feasts that all Jewish men were required to attend (Exodus 34:18-23).

The timing of this miracle was after Jesus had been teaching and healing many people in the Capernaum area on the northwestern shore of the Sea of Galilee. It was then that Christ heard the news about John the Baptist's death at the hands of Herod Antipas. He was much saddened by the death of John, perhaps, because they were related to one another through their mothers (Luke 1:36). He decided that He and His disciples needed a quiet place and some rest (Mark 6:31), so He planned to cross by boat from Capernaum on the northwest side of the Sea of Galilee to a quiet place outside of Bethsaida on the northeast side, or Fisher Town as the name means. Bethsaida was also the hometown of Phillip, Peter, and Andrew (John 1:44). After getting into one of the boats, they set sail to cross the five or six miles. People began to walk around the

northern coast of the Sea of Galilee to meet him when He came ashore. Many who had previously looked to John the Baptist were now looking for the Shepherd about Whom John had told them.

As the boat beached on the shore, a crowd was gathering and getting larger all the time as others began to arrive. The people came, John says, because they desired to see more of the many miraculous signs he had performed (v. 2). John doesn't tell us the reason for the change in plans to get rest. In his record of the same miracle, it is Mark who writes: **"When Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd. So he began teaching them many things"** (Mark 6:34). Mark points explicitly to the heart of compassion the Lord has for His people. □

What is compassion? Compassion means to suffer alongside another. It is what makes a person feel pain when someone else hurts. It is a sincere sympathy and sorrow when one encounters another's misfortune, carrying with it a strong desire to ease their suffering. Sometimes, it is hard for us as humans to show compassion to others when we feel that they deserve their pain, i.e., that they are reaping what they have sown. Christ is so different toward us. He feels the pain of His people. When Christ confronted Saul as to his persecution of Christians on the Damascus Road, He asked him, **"Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?"** (Acts 9:4). In the darkness of his soul, Saul had been persecuting Christians, but the Lord is so of one heart with His people that He felt the pain of them at the hands of Saul. In the risen Lord's mind, Saul was persecuting Him.

Christ was moved not only by the physical hunger of the thousands before Him but also by their spiritual hunger for the Word of God. So, He began teaching them many things, healing the sick, and relieving their pain (Matthew 14:14). His own need for time with His disciples was subservient to the suffering of His people. Mark 6:35 tells us that it was evening before thoughts about lack of food arose. Maybe, the disciples brought this up because they still wanted time alone with the Lord. The need was to send the people away before all the nearby town food markets closed for the evening.

Times of Testing

⁵When Jesus looked up and saw a great crowd coming toward him, he said to Philip, "Where shall we buy bread for these people to eat?" ⁶He asked this only to test him, for he already had in mind what he was going to do. ⁷Philip answered him, "Eight months' wages would not buy enough bread for each one to have a bite!" ⁸Another of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, spoke up, ⁹"Here is a boy with five small barley loaves and two small fish, but how far will they go among so many?" (John 6:5-9).

Question 1) If Jesus already knew what He was going to do, why did He give the tests? (v. 6). What do you think He was hoping to accomplish with His words to Philip? Could God be doing the same in your life?

John tells us that Phillip, whose town was near to this grassy hillside, was the first with a test from the Lord. Matthew records how many people were in the crowd: **"The number of those who**

ate was about five thousand men, besides women and children” (Matthew 14:21). Five loaves of bread and two fish are not much when one considers that there were, more than likely, at least 12,000 people that sat down to eat. Furthermore, John 6:9 tells us that we are talking about five small barley loaves, which in the *Mishnah*, a Jewish commentary, was the bread which the poorest of the poor ate.¹

Many situations we experience in life are a test from the Lord for us to evaluate our faith in God. Many of us are tried with difficult conditions every day, and we are forced to respond to the question, “Where am I going to get that from?” How pleased He is when we respond with a heart that says, “I am at the end of my resources, Father. Would You please help me?”

It is my persuasion that God often leads us into situations, which are entirely beyond our resources so that He might stretch our faith beyond our capacity. God is at work in our lives to prepare us for eternity. Life is but the school whereby the Church of God is trained for her role as the Bride of Christ in eternity. We often cannot see the hands of the Divine Potter at work in shaping us for what He has for us on the other side of this life. Alexander Maclaren once said:

It is often our (God-given) duty to attempt tasks to which we are conspicuously inadequate, in the confidence that He who gives them has laid them on us to drive us to Himself, and there to find sufficiency. The best preparation of His servants for their work in the world is the discovery that their stores are small.²

God allows times of testing to come to His people. The Lord permits times of hardship and needs to come to us to reveal where our faith lies. Do you tend to rely on any natural resource that you can devise? Do you look expectantly to parents or friends? Is it to put more on the credit card? On whom do you rely upon when the going gets tough? Could it be that, like Philip, God has allowed a test of your faith to come through your circumstances? Where do you turn in your darkest hours?

Over the years that I have served as a pastor, I have found that men are like elastic bands: they have to be stretched to be effective. The greater the trial and hardship that you are enduring, to that same degree is the level of character and gifting that God wants to establish in your life. When you look at the impossibility of something you are experiencing, does it cause you to look more closely to the Lord in higher expectation and prayer for His help, and do you say with the Apostle Paul, “My God shall supply all your need...” (Philippians 4:19)?

Two disciples took the test that day. First, Jesus directed His words to Philip, who had been His disciple from the start of His ministry. Philip failed the test in three ways. First, he had seen most, if not all, of Jesus’ miracles, but his response is that of viewing the problem and not the solution. Sometimes, we can be so occupied with the circumstances of our difficulty, i.e., looking on the things which are seen rather than on the things that are unseen (2 Corinthians 4:18). We need to remind ourselves that God is much bigger than our difficulties and that we should see each problem as an opportunity for us to look to the Lord for His provision.

¹ Alfred Edersheim, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*, Hendrickson Publishers, page 467

² R. Kent Hughes, *Preaching the Word Series, Luke Volume One*, Printed by Crossway, Wheaton, Illinois, Page 332.

Secondly, he's more concerned about the odds against them than for them. He says that an ordinary man working for eight months could not have enough money for each person to have a bite (v. 7).

Thirdly, notice that Philip tended to think in terms of the barest minimum as if Jesus would provide just a mouthful for each person! Would it glorify God to feed the poor and hungry to the barest minimum? Can we not believe God for a more significant blessing than the barest minimum? The One Who had created all things (Colossians 1:16), God in the flesh, was standing before him, and the only faith that Philip could muster was to think of a mouthful. God thinks in terms of filling our stomachs. You would think that these men who had seen Jesus perform miracles of healing day after day could respond with words, such as "Lord, amid this need, I don't know how, but I know that you can and will meet the need."

How like each of us they were. Thank God for His grace. Each of us needs God's help at each stage of our lives. When we get through one challenging test, we feel we have grown spiritually and reached a level of faith that can help us overcome that kind of challenge the next time. We must never lean on the arm of flesh because that only brings another testing challenge from the Father, Who is training all His children in overcoming. No, we must turn to the upholding hand of the Lord's grace and abandon all hopes of sustaining ourselves by our energies and abilities. □

Question 2) During a trial, do you default to a half-glass-empty worldview or half-glass-full attitude? How can a contrary disposition be changed? □ □

Next for the test was Andrew. It is possible that Andrew voluntarily takes the test, for we do not read that Jesus asked him. How did Andrew come across the boy with his packed lunch? It seems as if he went out looking, wondering what kind of food was out there by asking people. He must have gone among the crowd to check out the food situation. We don't know how he found the boy, but he brought him to Jesus with what he had in his packed lunch before going and spoiling it all with his words, "Here is a boy with five small barley loaves and two small fish, but how far will they go among so many?" (v. 9). Andrew was making his faith calculation without considering Who was with him! Along with Philip, Andrew as well could not see beyond his resources to Christ's power and provision. They both missed an opportunity to speak words of faith that would have pleased the Lord. The Lord longs to see faith in God expressed by words and works.

Remember how delighted the Lord was at the words of the Roman centurion who wanted healing for his servant? When Jesus said that He would come and heal his servant, the centurion replied saying, "Lord, I do not deserve to have you come under my roof. But say the word, and my servant will be healed. ¹⁰When Jesus heard this, he was astonished and said to those following him, "I tell you the truth, I have not found anyone in Israel with such great faith" (Matthew 8:8-10). The centurion's words expressed the faith that was in his heart. Trust in God, showed through words and actions, is that which is honoring and pleasing to the Lord (Hebrews 11:6). I am sure that the Lord was looking for better responses from the twelve to the needs of the poor and hungry.

The Miracle of Feeding Five Thousand

When Andrew brought the boy with the packed lunch, it consisted of five barley loaves, more than likely smaller than an average pita bread size, i.e., enough bread for a boy's lunch. The two fish were more than likely two dried or pickled fish the size of sardines, for so the Greek word for fish, *opsarion*, indicates. The pickled fish would add a bit of taste to help the barley bread go down. As the disciples looked at this boy's lunch, the Lord uttered something startling: “**Have the people sit down**” (v. 10). To sit down was saying, “Let's sit down to eat” when there was nothing to eat but this boy's lunch. Mark, in his narration on this same miracle, adds that Jesus directed the people to sit down in groups of fifty and hundreds:

³⁹Then Jesus directed them to have all the people sit down in groups on the green grass. ⁴⁰So they sat down in groups of hundreds and fifties. ⁴¹Taking the five loaves and the two fish and looking up to heaven, he gave thanks and broke the loaves. Then he gave them to his disciples to set before the people. He also divided the two fish among them all (Mark 6:39-41).

I notice Jesus' prayer posture was not to bow his head, close his eyes, and say a prayer. He lifted His eyes to heaven (v. 41) and talked to Him Who is above the clouds. Isn't it amazing how religious we can become? Whenever anyone says, “Let's pray,” our habit is immediately to bow our heads and close our eyes. From where does that tradition come? Five times in Scripture Jesus prayed by looking up to His Father in heaven. Why don't we take this as our model for prayer?

After He broke the bread He said the blessing, which was probably the traditional blessing from the *Mishnah*: “Blessed be you, O Lord our God, king of the world, who causes bread to come forth from the earth” (Berakcot 6:1). He then broke the bread and fish into pieces and “gave.” The Greek imperfect tense of the verb says that He “kept giving.” Wouldn't that have been wonderful to watch?

Question 3) Why do you think Jesus directed them to sit in groups of fifty and hundreds?□

First of all, people were told to sit down. The things of God are given to us when we cease striving and our soul is resting upon God. We are seated, not standing, in heavenly places in Christ Jesus “**And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus**” (Ephesians 2:6). Have you given up on striving to please God by your works? Have you taken your place of resting on the work of Christ on your behalf? The second reason, perhaps, as to why He had them seated in groups, is that the things of God are more easily received when we are fellowshiping and enjoying being in community. Let's now read John's testimony:

¹⁰Jesus said, “Have the people sit down.” There was plenty of grass in that place, and the men sat down, about five thousand of them. ¹¹Jesus then took the loaves, gave thanks, and distributed to those who were seated as much as they wanted. He did the same with the fish. ¹²When they had all had enough to eat, he said to his disciples, “Gather the pieces that are left over. Let nothing be wasted.” ¹³So they gathered them and filled twelve baskets with the pieces of the five barley loaves left over by those who had eaten. ¹⁴After the people saw the miraculous sign that Jesus did, they began to say, “Surely this is the

Prophet who is to come into the world." ¹⁵Jesus, knowing that they intended to come and make him king by force, withdrew again to a mountain by himself (John 6:10-15).

As they began to eat, I would think that the noise level began to rise as each person was given bread and fish beyond the amount of five loaves and two fish for each group of fifty. I wonder if each of the groups was told beforehand that all they had on the menu was a little boy's packed lunch. Each of them that sat with family and friends knew that their relatives would not lie to them as to the amount that they had eaten. To be put together into groups of families and friends gave no room for the doubters who would say that no one else ate. There are some, the doubters of this miracle, who would have us believe that lots of people kept their lunches from Andrew, and when it came the time, they all ate their packed lunches. How absurd! The miracle was attested to by each of the Gospel writers with more than enough evidence as to time and place so that it could be verified. There were also twelve baskets of left-over pieces taken up later. No early Jewish texts have ever said that this event did not take place.

The more they were given, the more they ate. I can see each disciple going back to the Lord for more because each group ate more than each disciple could carry. It was astonishing to them that so little food was now filling each of them. I'm sure they asked for reassurances from the disciples as to the truth, "Are you sure that this was just one boy's lunch that we are eating?" As they ate, they looked at one another in amazement at the impossibility of it all. With God all things are possible!

Question 4) If you could see the scene, describe what you imagine took place. Could the disciples see fish and bread created in front of their eyes? How do you describe what took place?□

The Prophet Who Was to Come

How amazing it would have been to be one of the disciples sent by the Lord with a basket to collect the leftovers! As each group of fifty or a hundred threw their left-over pieces of fish and bread into the basket, they would each look into the basket and see way more fish and bread than when they had started! One would think that all the fish would be eaten because it was a smaller amount and tastier, but there were more than enough fish as well as bread to go entirely around the crowd. John mentions just pieces of bread in the baskets (v. 13), but Mark adds that there were pieces of fish and bread that were left (Mark 6:43).

How glorifying to the Lord as each family and social group confessed to all that they had eaten, with so much left over. One wonders why Christ didn't just allow the people to take home the left-overs. How beautiful for each of the disciples to each have a basket of food and know from where it came. It surely was very faith building. All the people saw all the remaining bits in twelve baskets before they left for home, and they realized the provision of the Lord to prepare a table in the wilderness just as God did with Moses (Exodus 16:12).

When the people began to realize the miraculous nature of the feeding of five thousand, they started saying, "Surely this is the Prophet who is to come into the world." (v. 14). Moses, many

hundreds of years previously had told them that God would send them a prophet like Moses and that they should listen very carefully to Him:□

The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own brothers. You must listen to him (Deuteronomy 18:15).

Here before them was the One about Whom Moses had told them. He was the Prophet Who would come into the world, and like Moses, He had fed them miraculously. Moses had supplied them with the heavenly bread that came down from God, the manna. He had also multiplied meat miraculously for them by feeding them with quail brought all around their camp (Numbers 11:31-34). When they began to realize that this was the One spoken by Moses, they wanted to take Him and make Him king. It was not God's timing for Him to be crowned king. God planned to crown Him with thorns. He withdrew by Himself for quiet prayer with the Father and left the disciples to return to Capernaum by boat.

What impossible situation are you facing for which you need prayer right now? Share your prayer needs and pray concerning the things that you are facing that are outside the bounds of your resources.

Father, come right now and touch each need that You see in the room. Lift each heart to look to Christ beyond any resources that they can muster. Meet Your people right where they are. Amen.

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