

Jesus Feeds Five Thousand

John 6:1-15

Warm-up Question: What was the occasion of the most food you ever ate or the tastiest meal you ever sat down for?

¹ Some time after this, Jesus crossed to the far shore of the Sea of Galilee (that is, the Sea of Tiberias), ² and a great crowd of people followed him because they saw the miraculous signs he had performed on the sick. ³ Then Jesus went up on a mountainside and sat down with his disciples. ⁴ The Jewish Passover Feast was near. ⁵ When 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?” ⁶ He asked this only to test him, for he already had in mind what he was going to do. ⁷ Philip answered him, “Eight months’ wages would not buy enough bread for each one to have a bite!” ⁸ Another 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?” ¹⁰ Jesus said, “Have the people sit down.” There was plenty of grass in that place, and the men sat down, about five thousand of them. ¹¹ Jesus 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. ¹² When they had all had enough to eat, he said to his disciples, “Gather the pieces that are left over. Let nothing be wasted.” ¹³ So they gathered them and filled twelve baskets with the pieces of the five barley loaves left over by those who had eaten. ¹⁴ After 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.” ¹⁵ Jesus, knowing that they intended to come and make him king by force, withdrew again to a mountain by himself (John 6:1-15).

The Where and When of the Miracle

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 the fact that Jesus is 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*. As we come to chapter six of John’s testimony of the life of Christ, we see another picture of the character and power of the Man from heaven. All four gospels record this miracle.

Matthew, the first gospel writer, records for us that the feeding of the five thousand happened at a time just after the murder of John the Baptist at the hand of Herod (Matthew 14:13). It was because of this that Jesus was looking for some quiet time with his disciples. Many who had previously looked to John the Baptist were now looking for the Shepherd that John had told them about. Mark, in his record of the same miracle records Jesus as saying that the people were as sheep without a shepherd (Mark 6:34). So He began teaching them many things. John places the timeline as some time after the healing at the Pool of Bethesda (John 6:1), perhaps a number of months later. John also records in verse four that the Jewish Passover feast was near. It could explain why many people were on the road and why men were not at their normal employ. Perhaps they were readying themselves for the trip toward Jerusalem for the Passover Feast, one of three feasts that all Jews were required to attend. We are told that Jesus had been teaching and healing many people in the Capernaum area when He heard the news about John the Baptist’s death. He decided to cross by boat from the northwest side of the Sea of Galilee, from Capernaum, to the northeast side, the vicinity of Bethsaida, or Fishertown, which is what the name means, so that the disciples and Jesus could find a quiet place and get some rest (Mark 6:31). Bethsaida was also the hometown of Phillip, Peter and Andrew (John 1:44). As they set sail to cross the five or six miles from west to east, people began to walk around the northern coast of the Sea of Galilee to meet him when He came ashore. The people came, John says, because they desired to see more of the many miraculous signs he had performed on the sick (John 6:2). As the boat beached on the shore He was met by a crowd that was getting larger all the time as others began to arrive. The gospel writer Matthew tells us something about Christ’s character for, although He was looking forward to time with His disciples, when He got out of the boat He was moved with compassion for the large crowd that was waiting there for Him. When His people hurt, He hurts. He is moved inwardly by His people’s pain. He began to heal their sick (Matthew 14:14) and

relieve their pain. His own needs for time out with His disciples were subservient to the pain of His people.

The Miracle

As it was getting later on in the day and the people had come from a long way off, He looked to Philip, perhaps because this grassy hillside was near his home town, “Where shall we buy bread for these people to eat?” (verse 5). These words to Philip were spoken to test him for He already knew what the Father had spoken for Him to do (verse 6).

If Jesus already knew what He was going to do, what do you think He was hoping to accomplish with His words to Philip?

God allows times of testing to come to His people. Times of hardship and want are given permission to come to reveal to us where our faith really lies. Do you tend to rely on any natural resource that you can come up with? Is it to look to parents or friends? Is it to put more on the credit card? Who do you rely on when the going gets tough? Could it be that, like Philip, your circumstances have been allowed by God as a test of your faith? Where do you turn in your darkest hours? Men are like elastic bands, they have to be stretched to be effective. The greater the trial and hardship that you are enduring, the greater the character and gifting that God is seeking to establish in your life. When you look at the impossibility of something that you are going through, does it cause you to look in greater expectation and prayer to the Lord for His help?

Two disciples take the test that day. First, Jesus directs Himself to Philip, who had been His disciple from the start of His ministry. Philip fails in three ways. First, he had seen most if not all of Jesus’ miracles but his response is that of seeing the problem, but not the solution. Secondly, he’s more concerned about the odds against them than for them. He says that a normal man working for eight months could not have enough money for each person to have a bite (verse 7). Thirdly, notice that Philip had a tendency to think in terms of the barest minimum. As if Jesus would provide just a mouthful for each person! Would that glorify God, to feed the poor and hungry to the barest minimum? Can we not believe God for greater than the barest minimum? God in the flesh was standing before him and Philip could only think in terms of a mouthful, whereas God thinks in terms of filling our stomachs. You would think that

these men that had seen Him turn the water into wine, a creative miracle, and miracles of healing day after day, could respond with an ounce of faithful words such as, “Lord, in the midst of this need, I don’t know how, but I know that you can and will meet the need.”

It is possible that Andrew voluntarily takes the test for it doesn’t seem as if he was asked. How did Andrew come across the boy? It seems as if he went out looking, wondering what kind of food is out there by asking around. He must have gone among the crowd checking out the food situation. We don’t know how he comes across the boy, but he brings him to Jesus with what he had in his packed lunch, but then he spoils it all by his words, “Here is a boy with five small barley loaves and two small fish, but how far will they go among so many?” (verse 9). Andrew could not see beyond their own resources to Christ’s power and provision. Both he and Philip missed an opportunity to speak words of faith that would have pleased the Lord. 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 just say the word, and my servant will be healed. . . .”¹⁰ When 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. This pleases the Lord more than anything. Faith in God, expressed 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 to the needs of the poor and hungry from the twelve.

In the midst of a trial, do you default to a half-glass empty worldview or half-glass full attitude? How can a negative attitude be changed? Discuss with one another what things you can practice to overcome negativity and doubt.

When the boy’s packed lunch was brought forth, it consisted of five barley loaves, more than likely smaller than your average pita bread size. The two fish were more than likely two dried or pickled fish of the size of sardines, for so the Greek word for fish, opsarion, here indicates. Barley bread was bread that only the very poor ate, not being very tasty. The pickled fish would add a bit of taste to get it down. As the disciples looked

at this boy's lunch the Lord uttered something startling, "Have the people sit down" (verse 10). This was the same as saying let's sit down to eat, when there was nothing to eat but this boy's lunch. What a step of faith! Mark, in his gospel on this same miracle, adds that Jesus directed the people to sit down in groups of fifty and hundreds:

³⁹ Then Jesus directed them to have all the people sit down in groups on the green grass. ⁴⁰ So they sat down in groups of hundreds and fifties. ⁴¹ Taking 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).

Why do you think Jesus directed them to sit in groups of fifties and hundreds?

The things of God are better received and marveled at when we are fellowshiping with friends and relatives and enjoying community. As they began to eat, I would think that the noise level began to rise as each person was given bread and fish way beyond the amount of five loaves and two fish even just for each group of fifty. I wonder if each of the groups were 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 together gave no room for the doubters that 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 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, and of course there were twelve baskets of left over pieces taken up later on.

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 up. 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 pos-

sible!

Where did the miracle take place? Do you think it was at the hands of Jesus or in the hands of the disciples as it was passed out, or both? If you were a fly on the grass, describe what you think you would have seen.

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 what they had started with! John mentions just pieces of bread in the baskets (verse 13) but Mark says there were pieces of fish and bread that were left (Mark 6:43). You would think that all the fish would be eaten because it was a smaller amount and tastier, but there was more than enough fish as well as bread to go completely around the crowd. How glorifying to the Lord as each family and social group confessed as to all they had eaten, with so much left over. One wonders why He didn't just allow the people to take the leftovers home, but how much more wonderful for all the people to see all the remaining bits in twelve baskets before they left for home, and realize just how wonderful the Lord is to prepare a table in the wilderness.

When the people began to realize just how miraculous this was that they had witnessed and been a part of, they started saying, "This is truly the Prophet!" 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:

¹⁵ 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 that Moses had told them about. He was the prophet who should come into the world, and like Moses, He had fed them miraculously. Moses had fed them with the heavenly bread that comes down, the Manna. Moses 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 of by Moses, they wanted to take Him and make Him king. It was not God's timing for Him to be crowned king—God's plan was to crown Him with thorns. He withdrew by Himself and left the disciples to return to Capernaum

by boat.

sources.

What impossible situation are you facing that you need prayer for right now? Share with one another your prayer needs and pray concerning the things that you are facing that are outside the bounds of your own re-

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

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