

# FEEDING THE FIVE THOUSAND

## John 6:1-15

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Second Presbyterian Church, Greenville, SC, May 18, 2008

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Jesus said, 'Have the people sit down.' Now there was much grass in the place. So the men sat down, about five thousand in number. Jesus then took the loaves, and when he had given thanks, he distributed them to those who were seated. So also the fish, as much as they wanted (Jn. 6:10-11).

**T**he different Gospels present Jesus' life and ministry in different ways, each selecting scenes that serve the author's purpose. Many important events are recorded in more than one Gospel, but only one of Jesus' miracles is recounted by all four. This miracle is Jesus' feeding of the five thousand, obviously a very significant event. In the three Synoptic Gospels – Matthew, Mark, and Luke – the miraculous feeding serves as the turning point between Jesus' public ministry in Galilee and his more private ministry to the disciples.

John probably expects us to know the chronology of the other Gospels, and to place this miracle in their timeline. In the Synoptic Gospels, so-called because of their similarity, Jesus has just concluded his public ministry in Galilee. This included the Sermon on the Mount (Mt. 5-7), his miracles in and near Capernaum (Mt. 8-9), the disciples' missionary journeys (Mt. 10), and Jesus' teaching of the parables (Mt. 13). A turning point seems to have occurred with the murder of John the Baptist, after which Jesus withdrew from the towns with his disciples. The crowds followed him, however, "because they saw the signs that he was doing on the sick" (Jn. 6:2). This miraculous feeding therefore occurred at a crossroads in Jesus' ministry, as he concluded his public ministry in Galilee and began focusing on the training of his disciples as he headed to the cross.

## A GREAT MIRACLE

One thing that makes this a great miracle is the way it confounds those who deny the supernatural in the Gospels. This was a pet project of liberal theology in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, but it is still with us today by means of groups like the Jesus Seminar, who search for the “real” and “historical” Jesus lurking behind the biblical record.

Liberal theology is able to get at the so-called “historical reality,” that is, a naturalistic interpretation stripped of the supernatural, by means of reinterpretation. This tactic sees the miracle accounts not as genuinely divine intrusions, but as moral or ethical breakthroughs. Scholars reinterpret this miracle by saying that Jesus didn't actually feed five thousand people with five loaves and two fish – such a belief is preposterous, they say. What really happened was that his example of love inspired others to break out food they had been stashing for themselves. It was a miracle of generosity, not of divine multiplication. The miracle does not call for us to believe in Jesus’ divinity, they argue, but to donate to the local food bank.

There are sufficient problems with this view as to refute it utterly. First, it is noteworthy that not one of the four Gospel writers either noticed or recorded anything like this reinterpretation. All of them – and here we have four independent sources, two of whom were eyewitnesses and participants – very clearly seem to have thought it was a genuine miracle. Second, remember that three of the four Gospels were written at a time when a great number of eyewitnesses would have been still living. Only John came significantly later. Matthew, Mark and Luke felt comfortable presenting this as a true miracle while knowing that many eyewitnesses could sustain or refute whatever they wrote. Either they were lying in the face of all these eyewitnesses or this was a great miracle just as they described.

Finally, when we study this miracle account in context it is impossible to believe that the liberal version could produce the effects the Gospels record. Luke’s Gospel directly links this miracle to Peter’s belief that Jesus is the Christ sent from God (9:20). In John’s Gospel, the people connected this miracle to the manna God provided during the time of Moses. They exclaimed, “Surely this is the prophet

who is to come into the world” (Jn. 6:14). The miraculous in the Gospels is so essential to their message that without them we get a different Jesus and a different Gospel altogether.

## A SIGN OF JESUS’ DEITY

If this miracle did nothing but confound unbelieving, liberal theology it would greatly glorify God and serve us a great purpose.

But, in fact, it has more to offer us, especially as a sign of Jesus’ deity. A sign points to something – it identifies something or someone – and this miracle identifies Jesus as the Son of God.

The passage begins with Jesus gathering the twelve disciples for some rest and recuperation, after a busy time of ministry. Perhaps Jesus also withdrew them to a remote location to avoid the notice of King Herod, who had just murdered John the Baptist. But Jesus could not get away from the crowds “because they saw the signs that he was doing on the sick” (Jn. 6:2).

Seeing a large crowd approaching, Jesus asked Philip, “Where are we to buy bread, so that these people may eat?” (Jn. 6:5). Philip was dismayed at the idea of feeding so many people. He replied, “Two hundred denarii would not buy enough bread for each of them to get a little” (Jn. 6:7). Two hundred denarii was over six-months wages, so Philip was talking about a lot of money, and even it would not suffice. All the disciples could come up with on the spot was five barley loaves and two fish offered by a boy Andrew brought to Jesus. Using this small amount of food, Jesus fed the great crowd of five thousand men (and by adding in women and children the crowd must have been several times larger). Jesus fed them all with twelve baskets of fragments left over.

This miracle vividly proves Jesus’ claim to deity. Who else could so multiply nature’s provision but the One who is Lord of nature, the Creator himself, God Incarnate? In John 5, Jesus defended his claim to be God’s Son before the religious authorities with a reasoned and biblical argument. In the miraculous feeding of the five thousand, he gave an even more eloquent proof. He shows himself to be great than the prophet Elisha, who prophesied God’s feeding of one hundred men with twenty loaves, and even greater than Moses, through whom

God fed Israel in the desert with manna from heaven. Jesus' miracle is far more impressive than either; what Elijah and Moses did through God, Jesus performed as God. This great miracle persuasively displays Jesus' divine power as the Son of God.

When studying the Bible, we always want to note what it tells us about God. This miracle not only proves that Jesus is God, but it also shows us what God is like. Jesus would later say, "Whoever has seen me has seen the Father" (Jn. 14:9), and in this miracle he displays several marvelous facets of God's character. We see God's *compassion*, as Jesus cared for the needs and troubles of this throng of people. We see his *zeal* for ministry, rousing himself from weariness to meet their need. Moreover, this miracle displays God's *attitude* about the world. Jesus did not sup with courtiers from silver platters, but ate plain bread with the poor. The Lord loves to dwell with the lowly and the meek. If this is how God was then, it is how God is now, since God does not and cannot change. He is not far off, aloof, or unwilling. Rather, God is now just as Jesus was then: compassionate, ready to help, and loving the lowly. Finally, Jesus demonstrates the *power* of God. He is armed with might so that no need is too difficult for him to meet. This is the God whom Jesus Christ reveals to the world.

## A NEW EXODUS

The feeding of the five thousand not only proves Jesus' deity and displays God's gracious character, but it also offers a living picture of the salvation Jesus came to bring. It achieves this by presenting Jesus' ministry in terms of the exodus, the greatest event of the Old Testament, in which God rescued his people from slavery in Egypt and brought them to the Promised Land. The exodus supplies the theological framework for John chapters six through eight. In these chapters, Jesus makes three great statements about himself, all referring to the exodus. In John 6:35, he says, "I am the bread of life," comparing himself to God's provision of manna in the wilderness. In John 7, Jesus appears at the temple during a ceremony that remembered God's providing water from a rock. He called out, "If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink" (Jn. 7:37). During another ceremony, commemorating the pillar of fire that guided Israel

through the desert, Jesus declared, “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life” (Jn. 8:12).

There are good reasons to believe that the exodus motif shapes Jesus’ feeding of the five thousand. First, there is a reference to the Passover: “Now the Passover, the feast of the Jews, was at hand” (Jn. 6:4). The Passover was the Jewish feast during which the people were supposed to go to Jerusalem to remember the exodus. Perhaps this is why there were so many pilgrims on the road that five thousand men plus their families could be here with Jesus. These people had gone to the Lord, but they had not gone to Jerusalem – they had gone to Jesus to receive the true Passover feast.

Moreover, there seems to be a connection between the remote location to which Jesus had gone and the desert into which Moses led the Israelites in the exodus. It is interesting that Luke 9:12 describes it as “a desolate place.” The Greek word literally means “desert.” But John says “there was much grass in the place” (Jn. 6:10). Luke seems to be making a literary allusion to the exodus, when Moses brought the people into the desert to meet with God.

The exodus exactly fits the pattern of Jesus’ ministry. Moses delivered the people from bondage to Pharaoh by means of great miracles, just as Jesus had been delivering Israel from Satan’s reign of sickness, death, and demon-possession. The culmination of Moses’ battle with Pharaoh was the Passover, when God sent his avenger to strike down the firstborn of Egypt. Only the Israelites, who had feasted on the lamb and spread its blood on their doors, were spared the wrath of God. The Passover meal was to be eaten by pilgrims who were ready for travel, with their cloak tucked into the belt, sandals on their feet, and a staff in their hand (Ex. 12:11).

There is also probably significance in the way Jesus had the people sit down on the grass. Luke says that he assembled them in groups of “about fifty each” (Lk. 9:14). This reminds us of Moses arranging Israel in tribes and clans as they prepared for the exodus. Israel’s tribes camped with the tabernacle of the Lord in their center; so also it is here. We are reminded of John’s statement that “the Word became flesh and tabernacled among us” (1:14). Lastly, in the exodus, God

fed Israel with manna from heaven, and beside the Sea of Galilee, Jesus multiplied the loaves to feed the five thousand.

We remember that this miracle serves as the culmination of Jesus' public ministry in Galilee. He had preached the kingdom of God, performed miracles of healing and deliverance, and called the people to follow him. The five thousand came to celebrate the true Passover with the true Savior and true Lamb of God, whose blood causes God's wrath to pass over. Here is the gathering of Christ's church: the new Israel assembled for deliverance by a new redeemer who is greater than Moses: God's Son, Jesus Christ.

It cannot be a coincidence that John presents this miracle right after Jesus' reference to Moses in the previous chapter. Jesus condemned the unbelieving religious leaders for ignoring Moses' own testimony to him in the Bible. "He wrote of me," Jesus asserted (Jn. 5:46). Now we see just what it was that Moses prophesied about Jesus. The feeding of the five thousand involves the living fulfillment of Moses' most famous prophecy: "The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your brothers – it is to him you shall listen" (Dt. 18:15). John notes that the crowds came to Jesus after "Jesus went up on the mountain" (Jn. 6:3). As Moses went up Mt. Sinai to receive the Ten Commandments from God, the new exodus people came to the new and greater Moses, Jesus Christ. Luke says, "He welcomed them and spoke to them of the kingdom of God and cured those who had need of healing" (Lk. 9:11). Jesus fed their hearts with the Word of God from heaven and then fed their bodies by miraculously multiplying the fish and loaves.

Just as this miracle depicts a new exodus, it also presents Christ as a new Redeemer. Christ the true Redeemer conquers our foes – Satan, death, and the bondage of sin. Christ the true Passover Lamb covers us with his blood so that God's holy wrath passes us by. Christ the new Moses leads us through the wilderness of this life so that we meet with God, hear his Word, and become his holy people. It is true that this exodus enters us into trials and testing, just as in the first exodus. This is why we hunger and need to be fed. The miracle of his feeding of the five thousand shows how able Jesus is to meet our every need, giving the new manna from heaven:

Jesus then took the loaves, and when he had given thanks, he distributed them to those who were seated. So also the fish, as much as they wanted. And when they had eaten their fill, he told his disciples, "Gather up the leftover fragments, that nothing may be lost." So they gathered them up and filled twelve baskets with fragments from the five barley loaves, left by those who had eaten. When the people saw the sign that he had done, they said, "This is indeed the Prophet who is to come into the world!" (Jn. 6:11-14).

The purpose of this miracle was not to inspire us to feed the poor, although that is a worthy application. Nor does it mainly advertise the Lord's Supper, although it supplies meaning to that sacrament. The main message is that Jesus is the Savior for all who long to be freed from sin and its bondage, who feel a hunger in their souls, and who look for a Deliverer to guide them to heaven. Jesus explained: "I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst" (Jn. 6:35).

Yes, this miracle urges us to have compassion on the hungry and lost; yes, it rebukes us if we are greedy and unwilling to share with others; and yes, it finds its reflection in the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. But none of these means anything unless we have come as hungry sinners to the Bread of life, the Lamb who was slain, and feed upon him for forgiveness and eternal life.

What does it mean to be a follower of Jesus? This exodus picture answers the question. It is to come with staff in hand, cloak tucked into your belt, as a pilgrim departing from bondage and headed towards our home in the land of promise. It is the Kingdom of God in this desert world, the exodus people saved by the blood of the Lamb, fed and led by the Lord, to the place of rest that lies ahead.

Does it sound a wearisome or unattractive prospect to follow Jesus as a pilgrim? Then look again at this picture. By his power, because of his great compassion, Jesus "transforms the desert into a place of rest and refreshment and life through the power of God."<sup>1</sup> The hungry ate their fill, John says (6:12); Luke says, "all ate and were satisfied" (Lk. 9:17), with more left over than they had at first. Yes, Jesus calls us out of the world and into the desert with him. But there he feeds us

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<sup>1</sup> William L. Lane, *Mark* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1974), 229.

and satisfies our needs, as the Psalmist declared, “Delight yourself in the Lord and he will give you the desires of your heart” (Ps. 37:4).

## FOLLOWING JESUS

**B**y feeding the five thousand Jesus displayed his deity, and dramatized in miniature form the great salvation he offers the world. It therefore matters more than anything else how we respond to his offer of salvation and life.

It is instructive to see how the five thousand responded to this miracle. John records, “When the people saw the sign that he had done, they said, ‘This is indeed the Prophet who is to come into the world!’” (Jn. 6:14). But Jesus perceived “that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king,” so he “withdrew again to the mountain by himself” (Jn. 6:15).

This shows that it is possible to believe that Jesus is a savior, but only to desire a salvation of earthly prosperity. This was the case of Israel in the first exodus. When Moses brought them to God at the mountain, most of them thought only of earthly liberties and bodily provision. When things became difficult they complained and rebelled. When Moses was absent on the mountain, they made and worshiped an idol of a golden calf.

This same danger faces us today. There is a great difference between wanting the bread that Jesus gives and the bread that Jesus is. Those who seek only an earthly happiness – and our churches are filled with such people today – will not enter into the salvation that Jesus has in mind. Later on, he rebuked these people he had so lovingly fed: “You are seeking me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves. Do not labor for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures to eternal life” (Jn. 6:26-27). They wanted to put Jesus in charge of the local government to keep feeding them earthly bread. But Jesus departed and went back to the mountain by himself. His agenda was not of the earth, but of heaven; his priority was not popularity with men but fellowship with God.

This poses a challenge to professing Christians today. Are you willing to follow Jesus into the desert: that is, into the demanding experience of an authentic and holy Christian life? When you come

to him are you forsaking the world and your worship of its pleasures and treasures, staking your hopes not on earth but in heaven? Or are you mainly interested in the practical benefits Christianity can give you now? The first exodus called for Israel to leave the realm of sin and engage in a difficult wilderness journey of testing and trial, relying on the supernatural provision God promises. The new exodus in Christ is no different. Jesus calls us to forsake sin and worldliness, and follow him on the difficult path of holiness. Luke makes this point most clearly. It was just after feeding the five thousand that Jesus told his close disciples, “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me” (Lk. 9:23). This is the only true Christian life: trusting Jesus for forgiveness and new life, following Jesus to the cross and through this desert world, and entering with Jesus into a Promised Land beyond. Is it difficult? Yes! Is it worth it? Absolutely. Moreover, it is the only life of true satisfaction, simply because it is Jesus who leads us. Everything Jesus calls us to do, he has done before us, and the Savior who died for our sins will strengthen us with his mighty, compassion grace.

Let me conclude with a word to those who have not yet come to Christ. You are not a part of this exodus gathering; you have yet to turn your back on Egypt with its pleasures and bondage to sin. You do not have the spiritual labors that Christians do, but neither do you have their destiny in glory or the spiritual food that satisfies their souls. Can you not see what Jesus offers? Do you not realize that in this hungry, perishing world, Jesus has opened up a way to life for you? He demands only that you believe and follow him. The prophet Isaiah, speaking for Jesus, calls to us all:

Come, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and he who has no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price. Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy? Listen diligently to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food. Incline your ear, and come to me; hear, that your soul may live (Isa. 55:1-3).