

THE LOAVES AND THE LORD

John 6:1-15 (No. 34)

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INTRODUCTION

The only miracle Jesus performed and recorded in all four gospels—other than his own resurrection—is what's known as Jesus' feeding of the five thousand. And that's the subject of our study as we open John 6. This is the time that Jesus fed the five thousand having only five loaves and two fish.

The name of the miracle, though, is not quite accurate, because Jesus didn't feed five thousand on the grassy hillside. He fed about five thousand *men* that evening. Matthew tells us that the 5,000 *didn't* include women and children, who were also fed (14:21). So all told, it's estimated that Jesus fed 20,000 or more people.

That makes this miracle—this sign—that Jesus performed the greatest miracle recorded in the gospels in terms of the number of people who witnessed it. In fact, we can go further and say that not only did it have the greatest number of witnesses, but it had the greatest number of participants. The crowd participated in the miracle by eating the food Jesus created out of thin air. They weren't merely spectators, they were participants.

In chapter 5, Jesus called on four witnesses in his defense of his claim to be God. Now in chapter 6, he essentially makes 20,000 additional witnesses of his ability to do what only God can do, which proves that he *is* God.

This miracle is unique in that it's a creative miracle. Other miracles, like his healings, were restorative—he restored a person's health or abilities. Still other miracles were transformative, like turning the water to wine—he transformed the water into wine. But in this miracle, he fed the multitude by creating food out of nothing.

And surely, these are some of the reasons that all four gospels record this miracle out of all the miracles that Jesus performed. But there's another reason the gospels record this miracle and if it wasn't for the Gospel of John, we wouldn't know the full significance of it.

This miracle and the crowd's response to it becomes a turning point in Jesus' ministry, and John, in particular, gives us details on why that's the case. Up to this point, Jesus' ministry has largely been public. He has gone to the crowds. He has tirelessly engaged the crowds through healing and preaching.

But after this miracle, his relationship with the crowds who followed him changed. His ministry became more private and focused on training the twelve disciples. He still had a public ministry, but his ministry was more withdrawn from the crowds. In fact, as far as the Gospel of John is concerned, this is the last *public* miracle Jesus does *in* Galilee.

We'll see that chapter 6 follows the same pattern as chapter 5. There's a feast of some kind.

Jesus performs a miracle. Then he teaches spiritual truths on the basis of that miracle. Then the Jews reject him. In chapter 5, he is rejected in the southern part of Israel, in Jerusalem. In chapter 6, he is rejected in the northern part of Israel, in the region of Galilee. The only place he hasn't been rejected in this gospel so far is Samaria.

Now, as I said, all four gospels record this miracle so we can draw on all four accounts in order to fill in the details. But only John records the full significance of the miracle and we'll watch that unfold over the course of the next several weeks as we study chapter 6.

But for now, what we learn through this miracle is that not only is Jesus God, but that Jesus provides for the needs of his people, especially by granting salvation and eternal life. So there is a great encouragement to all of us in this section of Scripture. Let's read John 6:1-15:

“After this Jesus went away to the other side of the Sea of Galilee, which is the Sea of Tiberias. And a large crowd was following him, because they saw the signs that he was doing on the sick. Jesus went up on the mountain, and there he sat down with his disciples. Now the Passover, the feast of the Jews, was at hand. Lifting up his eyes, then, and seeing that a large crowd was coming toward him, Jesus said to Philip, “Where are we to buy bread, so that these people may eat?” He said this to test him, for he himself knew what he would do. Philip answered him, “Two hundred denarii worth of bread would not be enough for each of them to get a little.” One of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, said to him, “There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish, but what are they for so many?” 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. 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!” Perceiving then that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, Jesus withdrew again to the mountain by himself.”

Again, we learn in this passage that Jesus provides for the needs of his people and this story unfolds in four parts.

Now, just so you track with this story, we'll call this first part, the mountain.

I. THE MOUNTAIN

Verse 1 begins, “After this Jesus went away. . .” Just as we saw in 5:1, “after this” doesn't have the idea of tight chronology, but sequence. The events of chapter 6 happened after the events of chapter 5, but they weren't necessarily the very next thing. In fact, there's a time gap between the white space of chapter 5 and 6. 5:1 refers to a “feast of the Jews” (an unspecified feast). 6:4 refers to “the Passover” (another feast of the Jews). The feast in chapter 5 may have been the Feast of Tabernacles and, if so, then at least six months passed before chapter 6.

Just to set our passage in the context of Jesus' ministry, again look at 6:4, “Now the Passover, the feast of the Jews, was at hand.” So this scene takes places around the Passover. If you fast-forward to John 11, John again writes of events surrounding a Passover and it's one year later. In chapter 11, it's the Passover of Passion Week. That would be Jesus' last Passover before he

died on the cross. So these events in chapter 6 take place in the final year of Jesus' earthly ministry.

Now, in the white space between chapters 5 and 6, what had Jesus been doing during that time? The other gospels fill in the time gap. Jesus was ministering all around Galilee. For about a year, Jesus made Capernaum (on the northern shore of the Sea of Galilee) his home base and from there he traveled around preaching and healing.

It's during this time, during his Galilean ministry:

- He preaches the Sermon on the Mount.
- He teaches his parables.
- He raises from the dead the widow's son at Nain.
- He calms the storm on the Sea of Galilee.
- He sends the demons into the pigs on the mountain-side and they drown themselves.
- He names the twelve apostles and later sends them out to minister on their own for a season.

All these great stories you're familiar with happen during his Galilean ministry. And the ministry begins to draw to a close when two things happen:

(1) Jesus receives word that John the Baptist had been beheaded in prison.

(2) The twelve apostles return from their ministry circuit.

Matthew seems to indicate that Jesus was quite affected by hearing of John the Baptist's death. Additionally, this had been a very busy season of ministry. Jesus' ministry was overwhelmingly popular and crowds were coming to him to be healed, seemingly non-stop. They all needed some rest.

Turn over to Mark 6, just so you can see how John 6 fits into all this. In 6:30, the apostles have just returned to Jesus from their ministry circuit.

Mark 6:30–31: "The apostles returned to Jesus and told him all that they had done and taught. And he said to them, "Come away by yourselves to a desolate place and rest a while." For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat."

This is how busy they were. No downtime. No leisure. No time even to grab a bite to eat. The crowds kept coming and coming. The demands of the ministry were constant. So Jesus says, let's go off to a place by ourselves and rest. Let's take a retreat.

So, verse 32, "They went away in the boat to a desolate place by themselves." They got in a boat on the Sea of Galilee from the west side and started going east. On the east side of the Sea of Galilee were fewer villages. John refers to the east side as "the other side." There weren't as many Jews over there. There were stretches of land that were desolate—nobody was around. So this was a great place for rest.

But the crowds weren't going to let Jesus off that easily. You can understand. Here was a healer

in a time when medicine wasn't that good. The life expectancy of a man was early 40s. If you were alive, you probably had an ailment of some sort. And here's Jesus who can heal your diseases! They were going to follow him wherever he went with all their mass of diseases and ailments.

So as Jesus and the twelve push off shore and begin the journey, verse 33 tells us the response of the crowd.

Mark 6:33: "Now many saw them going and recognized them, and they ran there on foot from all the towns and got there ahead of them."

Here's Jesus and the twelve on the boat and looking to shore, there was the crowd of people like a trail of ants and they're following the boat. As they go, the crowd grows. Some are running so that they can be first wherever Jesus lands. By the time they land, people are waiting for him. There won't be any rest today. The retreat is cancelled.

Jesus' response is remarkable given how drained they all were and that he had just heard his cousin had died.

Mark 6:34: "When he went ashore he saw a great crowd, and he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd. And he began to teach them many things."

Matthew and Luke add that he healed their sick. This is the same instance that John records in 6:1: "After this Jesus went away to the other side of the Sea of Galilee, which is the Sea of Tiberias." The Sea of Tiberias was another name for the Sea of Galilee, when John wrote his gospel. So this is the scene as John 6 opens. Jesus has landed and the crowds are coming.

John 6:2: "And a large crowd was following him, because they saw the signs that he was doing on the sick."

This is the crowd that followed him from the west side. Why were they after him? Because he's a miracle worker. He heals. Most of these people weren't his disciples. They weren't following him because he had the words of eternal life and he taught them truth and they wanted salvation. They came to get something from Jesus. They were attracted to Jesus because they saw the signs and they wanted the show.

You can always gain a crowd with a good show. Packing a room with hundreds isn't hard if you put on a show. What *is* hard is getting a crowd interested in the truth.

John 6:3: "Jesus went up on the mountain, and there he sat down with his disciples."

From that point, he began to heal the multitudes and teach them.

From the setting of the mountain, we move to the second part of the story—the multitude. That takes us from the setting to the second stage of this story—the crisis.

II. THE MULTITUDE

The other gospels fill in the details a bit: Jesus healed and taught the people the rest of the day.

The people kept coming even as the day was turning to evening. But they were in a desolate area and there wasn't enough food in the area for 20,000 people. So the disciples grow concerned:

Luke 9:12: "Now the day began to wear away, and the twelve came and said to [Jesus], "Send the crowd away to go into the surrounding villages and countryside to find lodging and get provisions, for we are here in a desolate place.""

This was about ready to turn into a humanitarian crisis. The crowds aren't going to leave because Jesus is there. But there's not enough food in the area. There's nowhere for them all to stay. The twelve want Jesus to dismiss the crowds.

Here's how Jesus responds:

John 6:5: "Lifting up his eyes, then, and seeing that a large crowd was coming toward him, Jesus said to Philip, "Where are we to buy bread, so that these people may eat?""

He asks Philip what to do. That's reasonable: Philip was from a nearby town, perhaps he knew the area.

Why did Jesus ask the question? He's actually not looking for advice. He didn't need his help. Verse 6 tells us that Jesus was testing Philip: "He said this to test him, for he himself knew what he would do." So Jesus knows what he'll do. But he asked Philip to test his faith.

Philip is the disciple that knows the Old Testament well enough to say about Jesus in chapter 1: "We have found him of whom Moses in the Law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph." He knew his Old Testament. So he also knew the story of how God fed Israel in the wilderness with manna—bread from heaven. Would Philip trust in the one who is greater than Moses, the one who was about to create bread out of nothing in their midst? Jesus was testing him.

His question also gets Philip to vocalize the impossibility of the situation. Where are we going to buy bread for all these people, Philip?

"Philip answered him, "Two hundred denarii worth of bread would not be enough for each of them to get a little" (6:7).

A denarius was a day's wage (Matthew 20:2). So two hundred denarii was 8 months' wages. Philip says, even if we had that much money, it wouldn't be enough money to buy bread for them all—they wouldn't all even get a small bite.

This is an impossible situation. They don't have enough food. They don't have enough money. They don't have enough places for people to stay. It's late. It's been a long day. What are they going to do? Would Philip trust Jesus in this moment?

Have you had those moments? Moments where there are no good answers. The situation is impossible. You've looked at all the options and none of them are good.

It would be great if Philip had said, "Jesus, you're God. Can't you just make them some bread like you did for Israel in the wilderness?"

It would be great if he was filled with faith and said, “Jesus, I don’t know the answer to your question, but I’m looking forward to how *you’re* going to answer your own question.” But that’s not what Philip did. Mark tells us that Jesus called on the twelve to go out and find out how many loaves of bread they had. Their discovery only served to illustrate how dire their circumstances.

John writes: “One of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter’s brother, said to him, “There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish, but what are they for so many?”” (6:8-9).

You can almost hear the despair in his voice: “What are they for so many?” Only five barley loaves. Less than loaves, probably more like small cakes. Barley loaves, as opposed to wheat loaves, were the bread of the poor. An ancient writer (Philo) considered barley meal suited only “for irrational animals and men in unhappy circumstances.” So this wasn’t the kind of meal you’d want to eat.

And the boy had two fish—probably dried or pickled to make transportation easier. Obviously, that’s not enough. It’s time for a miracle. It’s time for the crowd to see again with their own eyes—as if the healings weren’t enough—who Jesus was.

So we move from the multitude to the miracle.

III. THE MIRACLE

John 6:10: “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.”

Mark adds that Jesus had the disciples organize people by 50s and 100s. That would make distribution of food easier. But it also served as a way to count the mass of people. Jesus wants the scale of the miracle to be known. As we already said, there were 5,000 men, but Matthew says that number didn’t include women and children. So 20,000 or more is likely. All of these are arranged in groups so that they could be counted.

On the east side of the Sea of Galilee there are places where grassy hillsides gradually slope up and away from the sea. You could easily see the mass of people spread out. It was spring time, so the grasses were green—a nice little detail showing us that John was an eyewitness.

So Jesus takes these five little loaves in his hand and gives thanks to God. He wants to make clear the source of this miracle. This gift of food is made possible by the Father of the family.

And then without any fanfare or any additional pomp or demonstrations of power—in the most casual way possible—he just creates more bread that wasn’t there before and has the disciples distribute the bread to the people. And he did the same with the fish. “As much as they wanted,” verse 11 says.

Here was bread that came from grain that was never harvested, never grown in the dirt. Bread that was never baked. Here was fish that never started as eggs, never swam in the sea, never caught by a fisherman. Bread and fish never tainted by creation that groans because of sin. This is bread and fish from heaven. And Jesus is creating it out of thin air. He just keeps handing it

out. He gives bread away and he's always got more. And it must have tasted good because they people kept eating. Verse 12 says that they ate their fill. That word "fill" comes from the word used of fattening cattle. They ate so much they were stuffed. The crowd loved it. Of course they did, this was the best bread and fish they'd ever eaten.

To further show the power of the miracle, Jesus has the disciples gather up all the pieces that were left over after everyone was stuffed.

John 6:12: "And when they had eaten their fill, he told his disciples, "Gather up the leftover fragments, that nothing may be lost.""

This isn't about being thrifty. The power of the miracle is shown yet again: they'll end with more bread than they started with even after 20,000 had eaten their fill.

John 6:13: "So they gathered them up and filled twelve baskets with fragments from the five barley loaves left by those who had eaten."

Twelve baskets—one for each disciple who went around collecting fragments. Five loaves become twelve baskets full. Mark writes they did the same with the fish.

With the miracle having been done, what's the response of the crowd? That takes us to the last part of the story—the movement.

IV. THE MOVEMENT

To understand their response, you have to understand what it was like in those days to get food. It wasn't as easy as going to the grocery store where the shelves would be full. The battle for food was daily. Famine was a real threat. The toil to put food on the plate was an everyday reality. And here is Jesus. Not only can he heal all diseases, but he creates food instantaneously. The crowds were stirred into a frenzy. They knew the miracle had occurred.

No one ever doubted Jesus' miracles—not even those who hated him. His enemies said he did miracles by the power of Satan, but they didn't doubt the miracles were real. They were self-authenticating. Twenty thousand people just became witnesses of Jesus' power. They knew a sign had been done among them. How do they respond?

John 6:14: "When the people saw the sign that he had done, they said, "This is indeed the Prophet who is to come into the world!""

We've seen this title used before—the Prophet. It seems to be used of people who truly don't know Jesus. It comes from Deuteronomy 18 where Moses tells of a prophet who will come in the future (vv. 15, 18). And that prophecy does indeed refer to Jesus. Jesus is the Prophet. Apparently, these Jews thought of the prophet as an end-times figure who would bring in a new era for Israel. Perhaps they thought of the Prophet and the Messiah as the same.

Regardless, the crowd starts to get the idea that if Jesus can do these miracles, maybe they should make him king so that he can defeat the Roman oppression. If this idea wasn't put down, the Romans could have easily wiped out the mob and arrested Jesus for sedition.

So, verse 15, “Perceiving then that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, Jesus withdrew again to the mountain by himself.” He was, in fact, the Prophet and the Messiah and the King of the Jews. But he made his escape because it wasn’t yet time for Jesus to go to Jerusalem as a humble king, riding on a donkey. That would be a year later—at the next Passover. But now, he still had his Father’s business to complete.

CONCLUSION

There are many lessons in this story. We learn of people who are attracted to Jesus for all the wrong reasons. They came to get something from Jesus. As long as Jesus made no demands on them, they followed him. But they didn’t want Jesus or to acknowledge him as Lord and Savior. There are people like this today. They come to church for a show. They come to Jesus to get a better life—their best life now.

In the weeks to come, we’ll see that this story is the set-up for a longer teaching from Jesus that not only does he give bread, but he is the bread of life. You gain eternal life through him—by partaking of him. Only by trusting in Jesus can anyone be saved.

And a final lesson from this story—the lesson we started with—is that Jesus provides for the needs of his people. We can’t skip over the fact that again and again Jesus is concerned with not only the spiritual needs of his people, but their other needs as well. He is compassionate. And despite great circumstances of impossibility, Jesus knows what to do and he will provide for your needs as well.