

Luke 9:10-17
An Unexpected Feast

If there is one thing the unbelieving “man on the street” knows about Jesus, is that they know He did miracles. That ought not to surprise us, for there are more than three dozen miracles of Jesus recorded in the gospels. Many of these have been immortalized in art and have become a part of our cultural heritage, regardless of our personal beliefs. Calming the sea, raising Lazarus from the dead, and walking on water are only a few such examples.

It must have been an unusual day when Jesus did not perform a miracle. For more than a year, Jesus and His disciples had been traveling the area of Galilee. Fifty miles from north to south and about half that from east to west, Jesus had taught, healed and ministered to the needs of people from His center of operations in Capernaum. News of His and His works had spread everywhere.

Then, He sent out His disciples to do the same. They were partnering with Jesus in His earthly mission of preaching the kingdom of God. Now they were returning from their mission. They were gathering together, and Jesus was scheduling time to debrief and relax. But it did not quite turn out that way. Jesus performed a miracle so great that afterward, people wanted to make Him king.

This event is the only miracle (apart from the resurrection) that is found in all four gospel narratives. The differences in the accounts of the gospel writers are insignificant, and none of the details are irreconcilable. This particular miracle was perhaps the greatest creative miracle since the flood. It was the culmination of His ministry in Galilee, and it left no room for confusion about His claims to deity. After this, Jesus went to the Gentile regions of Tyre and Sidon, and then to the Decapolis. From there He journeyed south to Judea and His passion.

A Time for Rest

“When the apostles returned, they gave an account to Him of all that they had done” (v. 10). You can imagine them all trying to speak at once when Jesus asked, “so, how did it go?” I am inclined to think Peter spoke loudly and excitedly. There was, no doubt, much to report. What miracles had they performed? What confrontations had they dealt with? What responses had they seen? There must have been a combination of excitement, pride, and frustration in the conversations they had.

Jesus knew the physical and mental cost of ministry. After all, we must remember that He as a man just as we are. He had been hungry, thirsty, and tired. He had been so tired He could sleep through a raging storm at sea. He recognized that His disciples needed rest. Therefore, “taking them with Him, He withdrew by Himself to a city called Bethsaida” (v.10). Away from the crowds, they could regroup, talk about what the past weeks had been like, and get prepared for the next phase of ministry.

A quick reminder that if Jesus and His disciples needed a break from ministry, so do we. While we all appreciate the need to redeem the time, we must be good stewards of our health, our families, and our personal spiritual growth.

The precise location of Bethsaida is debated, but as the name means “house of fish” it was likely a small fishing village along the shores of the Sea of Galilee. Most think it was located along the eastern shore near the northern part of the lake. It was small (we can infer that from the lack of historical records), but it was also the hometown of Peter, Andrew, Philip (John 1:44), and perhaps Nathaniel.

Despite producing such men, Bethsaida is not remembered as a place where faith in Jesus flourished. Jesus eventually pronounced this curse upon them, “¹³Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the miracles had been performed in Tyre and Sidon which occurred in you, they would have repented long ago, sitting in sackcloth and ashes. ¹⁴But it will be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon in the judgment than for you” (Luke 10:13-14).

To be compared to the Gentile towns of Tyre and Sidon was no small criticism. These cities were the epitome of paganism and wickedness. They had been cursed since long ago (Isaiah 23, Ezekiel 26-28), and this powerful prophecy from Zechariah,

“³For Tyre built herself a fortress
And piled up silver like dust,
And gold like the mire of the streets.
⁴Behold, the Lord will dispossess her
And cast her wealth into the sea;
And she will be consumed with fire.” (Zechariah 9:3-4).

That the miracle of the great feast occurred in the area around Bethsaida, and no doubt included many, if not most, of its inhabitants, only added to their sin and shame.

Another Plan

Jesus was not successful in avoiding crowds and finding a quiet retreat. People tracked Jesus. They stalked Him. Luke records that “the crowds were aware” of what He was doing “and followed Him” (v. 11). Mark mentions that the people “ran there together on foot from all the cities, and got there ahead of them” (Mark 6:33). As Jesus sailed across the Sea to a point on the opposite shore (Mark 6:34 and Matthew 14:14 say that Jesus “went ashore” when He arrived, implying He had been in a boat), the crowds hurriedly walked around by foot to catch Him.

How tempting it must have been to send them away! After all, many of them were not genuinely interested in the faith. They only wanted to see miracles. John recorded that “a large crowd followed Him, because they saw the signs which He was performing on those who were sick” (John 6:2). Jesus was tired, His disciples were tired, and He wanted - He needed- to be alone with them.

But Jesus is compassionate, and His compassion showed. Immediately Jesus welcomed them and “began speaking to them about the kingdom of God and curing those who had need of healing” (v. 11). Mark relates that “He felt compassion for them because they were like sheep without a shepherd” (Mark 6:34). Jesus knew what they needed. Though they may have wanted to see healings, they needed to hear the gospel. The divine truth of Who He was was more important than what He could do.

The Problem

The teaching and the healing went on all day. Though considerable time had gone by, the crowd was not leaving. So as “the day was ending . . . the twelve came and said to Him, ‘send the crowd away, that they may go into the surrounding villages and countryside and find lodging and get something to eat; for here we are in a desolate place’” (v. 12). It was afternoon. The sun had begun its descent. The disciples were concerned that the crowd was hungry, and who knew what might happen with a hungry crowd.

You can almost hear their rashness in the request. “Send the crowd away” (v. 12). The ministry Jesus was doing was less important to the disciples than their concern about what the crowd might do if they all got hungry. There were villages and farms in the area. There these people might find some places where they could buy some food and even a bed for the night. Everyone could get together again in the morning, or perhaps Jesus would see wisdom and move on to a place where the crowds couldn’t find Him.

That the area was not a desert is learned from Mark where he says that the people were able to “sit down by groups on the green grass (Mark 6:39). Desolate, then, refers to isolation. The particular area where Jesus was teaching was away from inhabited settlements. In order to find food and a place to spend the night, the people would have to leave.

The disciples again demonstrated their lack of faith. Though they had seen Jesus perform miracles of healing, calming the storm, and even raising the dead, they were too focused on what they could see around them. They saw thousands of people, and they did not see any food. They were so concentrated on their present surroundings, that they even forgot the power of their God as demonstrated through Elisha,

“⁴²Now a man came from Baal-shalishah, and brought the man of God bread of the firstfruits, twenty loaves of barley and fresh ears of grain in his sack. And he said, ‘Give them to the people that they may eat.’ ⁴³His attendant said, ‘What, will I set this before a hundred men?’ But he said, ‘Give them to the people that they may eat, for thus says the Lord, “They shall eat and have some left over.”’ ⁴⁴So he set it before them, and they ate and had some left over, according to the word of the Lord” (2 Kings 4:42-44).

If that memory was too distant, they could have recalled the wedding at Cana.

“¹On the third day there was a wedding in Cana of Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there; ²and both Jesus and His disciples were invited to the wedding. ³When the wine ran out, the mother of Jesus said to Him, ‘They have no wine.’ ⁴And Jesus said to her, ‘Woman, what does that have to do with us? My hour has not yet come.’ ⁵His mother said to the servants, ‘Whatever He says to you, do it.’ ⁶Now there were six stone waterpots set there for the Jewish custom of purification, containing twenty or thirty gallons each. ⁷Jesus said to them, ‘Fill the waterpots with water.’ So they filled them up to the brim. ⁸And He said to them, ‘Draw some out now and take it to the headwaiter.’ So they took it to him. ⁹When the headwaiter tasted the water which had become wine, and did not know where it came from (but the servants who had drawn the water knew), the headwaiter called the bridegroom, ¹⁰and said to him, ‘Every man serves the good wine first, and when the people have drunk freely, then he serves the poorer wine; but you have kept the good wine until now’” (John 2:1-10).

Jesus responded to His disciples in kind. “You give them something to eat!” (v. 13) He said this, no doubt, with a wry smile. The ever literal disciples were confused. Surely Jesus was not serious. “We have no more than five loaves and two fish” they argued. Then they added, perhaps sarcastically, “unless perhaps we go and buy food for all these people” (v. 13). Since they themselves often had to go without, it was unlikely they had the financial resources to buy enough food to feed a large town.

Was Jesus trying to teach them that they could not solve their problems simply by refusing to help others? Was He trying to get them to realize the power of Whom they were with? Scripture does not say.

John records that Jesus played along. “Where are we to buy bread, so that these may eat?” Jesus asked Philip (John 6:5). The size of the crowd is indicated by Philip's answer “Two hundred denarii worth of bread is not sufficient for them, for everyone to receive a little” (John 6:7). Two-thirds of a year's wages was needed to meet the barest necessities of feeding this crowd. Luke says “there were about five thousand men” (v. 14). Thinking of a laborer today who might make, say, \$15 per hour, at full time that would be \$30,000 per year. If one considers that there must have been women and children in the crowd as well, the crowd might have reached easily 10,000. A mere \$2 per person was needed according to Philip to give them at least something.

An Unexpected Feast

Jesus did just what He had known all along He would do. Jesus was never random. He was never surprised. He had a plan to feed everyone, and then some.

First, Jesus “said to His disciples, “Have them sit down to eat in groups of about fifty each” (v. 14). In Mark's account, they sat in groups of hundreds and fifties. This all makes sense of they were grouped in families around the five thousand or so men. It was a practical way of organizing the crowd so they could be easily fed. Confused and expectant, the disciples obeyed, “they did so, and had them all sit down” (v. 15). John says it was near the time for Passover. That meant it was spring and there was grass for them to sit on. Everybody was comfortable and prepared to eat, but there was still no food.

Then Luke states simply that Jesus “took the five loaves and the two fish, and looking up to heaven, He blessed them, and broke them, and kept giving them to the disciples to set before the people” (v. 16). Every rabbi knew to acknowledge God as the source of earthly sustenance. Looking upward was no magic act, and Jesus recited no incantation. He simply blessed the food, that is, He gave thanks to God.

We can recall the Psalms:

Psalm 121:1 “I will lift up my eyes to the mountains;
From where shall my help come?”

Psalm 141:8 “For my eyes are toward You, O God, the Lord;
In You I take refuge; do not leave me defenseless.”

Psalm 145:15 “The eyes of all look to You,
And You give them their food in due time.”

Jesus then began to distribute the loaves and fishes to the disciples. Breaking the loaves and fish into edible sizes, Jesus passed around the food. As they came up to get more, there was more to give them.

Up and back the disciples came and went until after some time “all ate and were satisfied” (v. 17). The word itself means to fatten an animal for the slaughter. That is, these people did not just have their hunger abated; they were stuffed.

The miracle, itself, is more implied than stated. One can only imagine what was going through the minds of the disciples as they experienced this. There could be no mistake about the greatness of this miracle. The food with which Jesus began was barely enough to feed Himself, let alone His own company of disciples. But Jesus was not done. He had not forgotten His disciples who had been busy serving the meal and had not yet eaten. So Jesus ordered that nothing go to waste. Therefore, “the broken pieces which they had left over were picked up, twelve baskets full.” (v. 17). A basket for each disciple to eat.

As always, the miracle was done publically. Deception was impossible. The people would never have agreed to have been “filled” if they were not. It was an irrefutable sign of Jesus’ deity. When Jesus commands a thing, it is done. He is God.

An Expected Response

Luke’s account ends here, but John adds a postscript. In his account, this so moved the crowds that they “were intending to come and take Him by force to make Him king” (John 6:15). They hoped for a world free from sickness and hunger.

Take Aways

What a Savior this passage describes. It shows a Savior who has the ability to supply all our needs. It shows a Savior with unfailing compassion. It shows a Savior with generosity in abundance.