

The Feeding of the Five Thousand
Matthew 14:13-21
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The account of the feeding of the five thousand is found in all four Gospel records (Matthew 14:13-21; Mark 6:30-44; Luke 9:10-17 and John 6:1-14). In Matthew and Mark, it follows the story of Herod's order to behead John the Baptist. The death of John marks a new escalation in the opposition to the prophets of God, this time by those appointed by the Romans to govern the Jews.

The distressed people (14:13-14)

Matthew alone records Jesus learning of the death of John from John's disciples (Matthew 14:12). In verse 13, Matthew actually does not specifically write that Jesus heard about John, but only that he heard about what happened. But the story of the death of John in 14:3-12 was a flashback, and preceded the belief of Herod that Jesus was John risen from the dead (14:1-2).

Therefore, Jesus did not retreat in the boat immediately after he heard of John's death from the disciples of John. Herod's execution of John showed his willingness to put the prophets of God to death but what Jesus must have heard about was the belief by Herod that Jesus was the risen John the Baptist (Matthew 14:1-2). Word likely came to Jesus about Herod's view through one of the servants who Herod spoke to, and then possibly through Chuza, the wife of Herod's steward (Luke 8:3).

Jesus then moved to a secluded place in a boat in the realization that when Herod heard of the miracles of Jesus, he considered Him to be John. This placed Him in the same jeopardy as John faced. Luke 9:10 specifies where this secluded place was, "*Taking them with Him, He withdrew by Himself to a city called Bethsaida.*" Bethsaida was on the northeast shore of the Sea of Galilee. Matthew constructed his Gospel thematically, which explains why Jesus was in Nazareth, 25 miles from the sea, at the end of chapter 13.

With increasing opposition from the Jews, His time of ministry was becoming short. Earlier in Matthew 12:15, He avoided the animosity of the Pharisees by withdrawing. But He knew this was only a temporary escape, for He would not be able to escape the notice of people for long (cf. Mark 7:24). He would courageously continue His ministry in the face of mounting pressure against Him.

Jesus went to Bethsaida from the other side of the Sea of Galilee, likely from Capernaum (John 6:1). It was no small effort for the crowds to follow Him, running by foot (Mark 6:33) along the northern shore of the sea. They would have had to traverse the upper Jordan river that fed into the sea from the north to get to Bethsaida. Their efforts got them to the shore before Jesus landed.

Jesus saw the crowd that had followed Him and He went ashore, motivated by compassion for them. His compassion for the crowds was noted earlier by Matthew in 9:36, where the crowds were like sheep without a shepherd (Mark 6:34). Matthew 14:14 describes the compassion of Jesus leading Him to heal the sick and Mark 6:34 describes the compassion of Jesus leading Him to teach them many things, with Luke 9:11 including both. It is compassionate to help people physically as well as through teaching.

The disciples problem (14:15-18)

Since the time was getting late, the disciples were aware of the need for food. The lateness of the time was likely in the later afternoon in light of the word “evening” also appearing in Matthew 14:23 after Jesus sent the crowds away. Since the shore was some distance away from the villages, the disciples' plan was to give the crowds time to travel into the villages to buy food for their dinner. Luke 9:12 informs us that their plan also included lodging. Several small towns were near to Bethsaida where the crowds could have acquired food.

Jesus did not approve of the disciples' plan and His words, “*They do not need to go away; you give them something to eat,*” have been understood by some as directing them to do the miracle that He would do. However, this was not the understanding of the disciples.

Matthew omits the question that we find in the other three Gospel accounts, where the disciples ask Jesus about buying food for the crowd. Mark 6:37 tells us that the disciples estimated the total cost to feed the crowd of about 5,000 to be two hundred denarii. Since one denarii was equivalent to one day's work, this would be a very large amount of money necessary to buy food for them all.

John 6:5-7 highlights Philip as the disciple that was the spokesperson for the group. After Jesus tests Philip by asking where they would buy bread for the crowd, knowing He would perform the miracle. Philip responds by saying, “*Two hundred denarii worth of bread is not sufficient for them, for everyone to receive a little.*” So from this we can see that even two hundred days of work would not provide ample food for the size of the crowd.

The alternative to buying food for the five thousand men would be to use the food that was on hand, which was *“only five loaves and two fish”* (Matthew 14:17). Mark 6:38 informs us that it was Jesus who instructed the disciples to investigate what food was available, *“And He said to them, ‘How many loaves do you have? Go look!’ And when they found out, they said, ‘Five, and two fish’”* (Mark 6:38). John’s Gospel provides the background of how they have this food, *“One of His disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter’s brother, said to Him, ‘There is a lad here who has five barley loaves and two fish, but what are these for so many people?’”* (John 6:8-9). Thus John also specifies that barley was the type of bread available. All four Gospels emphasize the great lack of food on hand to feed the large crowd.

John 6:6 makes it clear that Jesus engaged this discussion with the premeditated goal in mind of teaching the disciples, *“This He was saying to test him, for He Himself knew what He was intending to do.”* He continued to lead them toward His intended miracle, telling them to bring Him the five loaves of bread and the two fish. He took this initiative to show His ability to take what was woefully inadequate to provide for their needs and make it more than adequate.

The dramatic provision (14:19-21)

As we read Matthew’s description of the feeding of the five thousand, we continue to see that he omits many small details of the story and chose to focus on the main point of Jesus’ miraculous power. This is true with the distribution of the food. Matthew wrote that Jesus ordered the crowd to sit down on the grass, while Luke and John write that Jesus did this through His disciples.

Matthew also leaves out how the people were divided up, while Luke 9:14 says, *“And He said to His disciples, ‘Have them sit down to eat in groups of about fifty each.’”* John 6:10 notes there was a lot of grass for the people to sit and Mark 6:39 includes that the grass they were sitting on was green. Mark 6:40 shows that this distribution was not at all exact, *“They sat down in groups of hundreds and of fifties.”* For Matthew, these details are superfluous.

All the Gospels say that Jesus gave thanks, but Matthew expands on this in the same way the other synoptic Gospels do. Each of the three synoptics described Jesus as (1) taking the five loaves and two fish, (2) looking up toward heaven, (3) blessing the food, (4) breaking the loaves and (5) giving the food to the disciples. Furthermore, the result of Jesus’ miracle is also described the same by all the synoptics, where (1) they all ate and were satisfied, (2) they picked up what was left of the broken pieces, and (3) there were twelve baskets full of food that was left.

Some view the description of Jesus looking up to heaven, blessing the food and breaking the loaves of bread as a related to the Lord's Supper, "*While they were eating, Jesus took some bread, and after a blessing, He broke it and gave it to the disciples, and said, 'Take, eat; this is My body'*" (Matthew 26:26). Yet this practice of Jesus was normative for all Jews of His day. In Judaism, there was a stringent custom to never eat a meal without giving thanks to God before and after the meal.

This practice of giving thanks must be seen in the context of dependency upon God to provide food. Jesus taught His disciples, "*Pray, then, in this way... 'Give us this day our daily bread'*" (Matthew 6:9,11). In such an agricultural society as the first century, famine was periodic and food supply was never certain from season to season. Thankfulness for one's daily bread was far more of a reality to people of the past than people of the modern western world. We are accustomed to supply chain economics that ensure not only our desired quantity of food, but also the quality of our food. No ruler in ancient times enjoyed anything like the abundance or variety of our modern food supply, for which we ought to be thankful.

All the Gospel writers make a point of the twelve baskets. John gave the most detail, "*So they gathered them up, and filled twelve baskets with fragments from the five barley loaves which were left over by those who had eaten*" (John 6:13). There was a large quantity of basketfuls leftover. Many connect the twelve baskets to the twelve disciples and to the twelve tribes of Israel, and see some significance in this. However, there are twelve baskets because the Lord directed the disciples to gather up the fragments, "*When they were filled, He said to His disciples, 'Gather up the leftover fragments so that nothing will be lost'*" (John 6:12). Apparently, each disciple used a basket to pick up the remaining pieces of the barley loaves.

Rather, Jesus will ask the disciples later in Matthew about the twelve basketfuls that were left over in order to relate it to the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees, "*But Jesus, aware of this, said, 'You men of little faith, why do you discuss among yourselves that you have no bread? Do you not yet understand or remember the five loaves of the five thousand, and how many baskets full you picked up? Or the seven loaves of the four thousand, and how many large baskets full you picked up? How is it that you do not understand that I did not speak to you concerning bread? But beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees.'* Then they understood that He did not say to beware of the leaven of bread, but of the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees" (Matthew 16:8-12). It is apparent that the significance of the basketfuls reflect not only on the abundance of Jesus' provision, but also on the lack of complete consumption of what He provided.

As important as the miracle of the feeding of the five thousand is, many have sought to undermine its power. The most infamous way this has been attempted is by removing the supernatural element from the story. The common liberal view of this account is that Jesus did not miraculously multiply the bread and the loaves, but rather the willingness of the lad who was willing to bring the five loaves and two fish moved the selfish people to share all the food they had brought with the entire crowd. This is not only not found in the text, but the accounts describe Jesus, not the people, as providing the food.

Conclusion

The feeding of the five thousand is such a significant miracle that it is the only miracle (besides the resurrection of Christ) that appears in every Gospel account. There are many reasons why this miracle is so important.

1. The feeding of the five thousand validates the Messiah

The miracles of Jesus validated who He was, the Messiah of Israel. The Jews believed the Messiah would feed them with bread from heaven as Moses had done (cf. Deuteronomy 18:15). The prophet Elisha fed one hundred men miraculously in 2 Kings 4:42-44. Jesus used the miracle of the feeding of the five thousand to follow in the line of such memorable prophets of the Old Testament who were used by God to provide for the nation.

As with other miraculous acts, this proved that Jesus was from God and ought to be listened to. This miracle was so dramatically different that each Gospel writer recorded it. The quantity of food to feed so little was beyond imagination and must be recognized as compelling support for Jesus' authority. This is why the crowd was moved to conclude that Jesus was from God, "*Therefore when the people saw the sign which He had performed, they said, 'This is truly the Prophet who is to come into the world'*" (John 6:14).

2. The feeding of the five thousand rebukes the unbelievers

The crowds participated in this miracle. They rushed by foot to meet Him on the shore. They were certainly aware that the "*place is desolate and the hour is already late*" (Matthew 14:15). In such a situation, many might have become hungry. No one could have expected this plan to provide for this need.

The sheer size of the provision was beyond five thousand people since *“about five thousand men who are, besides women and children”* (Matthew 14:21). Adding women and children to the five thousand could bring the total being fed to over fifteen thousand, perhaps as high as twenty thousand people. The size of the crowd observing this miracle was likely larger than any of His other miracles, providing the most eyewitness testimony to His miraculous power.

Furthermore, there was no lack, since, *“they all ate and were satisfied”* (Matthew 14:20). Indeed, there was food left over that was gathered up by the disciples. There could be no doubt that their need was met in an unexpected and remarkable way.

Because they were divided up into small groups and told to sit on the grass, the crowds were even better able to observe this miracle of feeding. John 6:14 shows the crowd observing the miracle, *“Therefore when the people saw the sign which He had performed.”* They recognized that He was from God, yet later in the same chapter of John’s Gospel, we find that *“many of His disciples withdrew and were not walking with Him anymore. So Jesus said to the twelve, ‘You do not want to go away also, do you?’”* (John 6:66-67).

The crowd had followed Jesus in the hope that He would heal them, as He had done throughout Galilee. They recognized His ability to heal and in His compassion, He healed their sick (Matthew 14:14). But no one had seen anything like this. Those interested in only His healing power were now faced with a new demonstration of His power and authority. To only follow Him for His physical healing and not for His spiritual healing would leave them physically well but spiritually dead.

Beyond this, to observe such amazing works of God and to fail to respond leads to greater condemnation. Even the true believers of the past longed to see such works of God, *“For truly I say to you that many prophets and righteous men desired to see what you see, and did not see it, and to hear what you hear, and did not hear it”* (Matthew 13:17). The words of Jesus in Matthew 11:21-22 describe the greater condemnation that those among the crowds would face by not responding in faith, *“Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the miracles had occurred in Tyre and Sidon which occurred in you, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. Nevertheless I say to you, it will be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon in the day of judgment than for you.”* To see this miracle of the feeding of the five thousand should have brought repentance by all who were present.

3. The feeding of the five thousand instructs the Twelve

The disciples were led by Christ to be active participants in this miracle in every way. Like the crowds, they were also in need of food and ate until they were satisfied. Jesus instructed them to have the crowd sit down in groups. John's Gospel makes note that Jesus initiated the discussion with them about buying bread to feed the crowds in order to test the disciples. His miracle was to teach the disciples for *"He Himself knew what He was intending to do"* (John 6:6).

Jesus led the disciples toward an appreciation of just how great His ability is to provide for their needs. Everyone ate and was satisfied, with more food left than they started with. He intentionally chose to feed a large throng of people with a mere five loaves of bread and two fish in order to emphasize His ability to supply for more than the need of any moment.

Jesus expected this lesson of the feeding of the five thousand to remain with the disciples. Yet after the next miracle that Jesus would do, walking on the Sea of Galilee, we find the disciples shocked by Jesus' ability to walk on water and calm the wind. *"Then He got into the boat with them, and the wind stopped; and they were utterly astonished, for they had not gained any insight from the incident of the loaves, but their heart was hardened"* (Mark 6:51-52).

Finally, Jesus used the miracle of the feeding of the five thousand to teach His disciples to beware of the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees in Matthew 16:5-12. He asks them, *"Do you not yet understand or remember the five loaves of the five thousand, and how many baskets full you picked up?"* (Matthew 16:9). Jesus focuses more on the twelve baskets full that were left than on the five thousand that were fed. Jesus was more than able to provide for their needs and He should be depended upon. The Pharisees and Sadducees were not teaching faith in God but were committed to the maintenance of their religious system.

4. The feeding of the five thousand instructs believers

The ability of the Lord to provide for our needs is essential to faith in Christ. His miracle of the feeding of the five thousand proved His ability to meet the physical needs of people, regardless of such an extraordinary deficiency of resources. Jesus met the needs of these people who were merely curious about His teaching and following because of His ability to heal them. If the Lord can provide for the needs of those who have not committed themselves to Him in faith, He surely can provide for our every need.

Yet our most fundamental need is spiritual, not physical. We can trust every word that proceeds from the mouth of God, knowing that it is true and faithful. The Lord's power to physically provide for the five thousand should convince us that He is able to provide spiritually for God's children. *"If I told you earthly things and you do not believe, how will you believe if I tell you heavenly things?"* (John 3:12). The earthly things are basic compared with the heavenly things.

We can completely trust the power of the Lord to provide for our daily needs, as Jesus instructed in Matthew 6:31-32, *"Do not worry then, saying, 'What will we eat?' or 'What will we drink?' or 'What will we wear for clothing?' For the Gentiles eagerly seek all these things; for your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things."* We can also completely trust the power of the Lord to deliver us from evil, *"the Lord knows how to rescue the godly from temptation"* (2 Peter 2:9). And we can completely trust the power of the Lord to deliver us to eternal life, *"My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me; and I give eternal life to them, and they will never perish; and no one will snatch them out of My hand. My Father, who has given them to Me, is greater than all; and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand"* (John 10:27-29).