

The Feeding of the Four Thousand
Matthew 15:32-39
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The feeding of the four thousand is more than a repeat of the miracle of the feeding of the five thousand in Matthew 14:13-21. There is a greater purpose for this miracle than mere repetition. There are several similarities between these two accounts. Both are near the Sea of Galilee, in a desolate place. Both involve Jesus giving thanks for the bread and the fish. Both show the disciples distributing the food, and both end with a boat trip. These similarities have led some to mistakenly conclude that these are repeated stories of the same event. However this is incorrect because the differences between the feeding of the 5,000 and the feeding of the 4,000 are significant. Also, it would be irrational for both Matthew and Mark to repeat the same story in two different places, with different details between the two.

We can observe this by a brief contrast between these two miracles of feeding by Jesus:

The Feeding of the Five Thousand Matthew 14:13-21	The Feeding of the Four Thousand Matthew 15:32-39
Northeast coast, near Bethsaida	Southeast coast, in Decapolis
Primarily Jews	Primarily Gentiles
In the Spring	In the Summer
In one day	Over three days
Five loaves	Seven loaves
Two fish	A few small fish
Twelve baskets leftover	Seven baskets leftover

These differences will point to the purpose of Jesus as we examine this account. He previously fed 5,000, along with women and children, on the north coast of the Sea of Galilee, near Bethsaida, which was primarily Jewish. In Matthew 15:32-39, Jesus will feed 4,000, along with women and children, on the east coast of the Sea, which was primarily Gentile.

Jesus discusses food with the disciples (15:32-34)

That the large crowds remained with Jesus for three days portrays His popularity. He kept the people engaged with His words and His works beyond the point where their resources would last them. The crowd was willing to remain with Him even to the point of hunger. Their lack of food was great enough that if they left to get food *“they might faint on the way.”* Even though *“some of them have come from a great distance,”* even they were willing to continue to be with Jesus. This demonstrates a great desire by these people to be with Jesus.

Jesus felt compassion for the crowds who had remained with Him, just as He felt compassion for the multitudes earlier, who *“were distressed and dispirited, like sheep without a shepherd”* (Matthew 9:36). While earlier His compassion was for their soul, here His compassion was for their physical need. They had nothing to eat and were hungry.

Given Jesus’ ability to feed the crowd miraculously, it is clear that His statement to the disciples was for their purpose. He knew He was able to feed them without sending them away hungry but it is apparent that the disciples were not able to acknowledge this ability. Jesus addressed His concern about the crowd to the disciples but did not include a solution to the problem. He only addressed His desire that they not be sent away hungry and placed into jeopardy.

The disciples’ question, *“where would we get so many loaves in this desolate place to satisfy such a large crowd?”* seems incredulous given they had just seen Jesus feed an even larger crowd. How could they have forgotten such a similar situation that occurred just a few weeks earlier? The answer to this question lies in the nature of man. How often do we neglect to remember the mercy of God in our own lives? How quickly do we forget God’s past provision, only to rely upon our own strength to provide for ourselves?

The disciples acknowledged their inability to provide for the crowd. A desolate place implies both a lack of inhabitants and sparse vegetation. The nearest city would be perhaps miles away, down the mountain (cf. Matthew 15:29). Even if they could acquire enough food to feed the 4,000 plus women and children, they would have to transport this food up to the crowd.

In truth, Jesus knew that His statement to them was an impossible desire to meet in light of the thousands of people in a remote location on a mountain. He spoke these words to the disciples in order to move them to consider their great inability in light of His miraculous ability.

Jesus prompted the disciples' faith by asking, "*How many loaves do you have?*" In the account of the feeding of the 5,000, it was the disciples who exclaimed their inability to feed the crowd with "*only five loaves and two fish*" (Matthew 14:17). By asking them "*How many loaves do you have?*" Jesus reminded them of how impossible it was to feed thousands of people with such a relatively small amount.

The disciples acknowledged the hopeless impossibility of feeding the crowd with "*seven, and a few small fish.*" The fish was used with a diminutive adjective that emphasizes the meager resources that they possessed. While this was two more loaves and a little more fish that was available at the prior feeding of the crowds in Matthew 14:17, it was still completely lacking for the need.

By this point the disciples probably would have begun to recall the earlier miracle of the feeding of the five thousand. Yet neither Matthew nor Mark make any point about the disciples' progress. The disciples may have thought that Jesus would not duplicate the miracle of feeding the multitudes after the feeding of the 5,000 since he rebuked those people, "*you seek Me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate of the loaves and were filled*" (John 6:26). Clearly, the point of this passage is something other than the weakness of the disciples' faith.

Jesus distributes food through the disciples (15:35-36)

As with the feeding of the 5,000, the disciples distribute food from Jesus. This participation by the disciples is part of their training from Jesus, who was moved with "*compassion for the people.*" The reason for His compassion was stated as "*because they have remained with Me now for three days.*" Our Lord is keenly aware of His followers and He will provide for their needs, even using others of His followers in the process. The disciples would learn this lesson of God's provision and compassion.

This distribution of the food was similar to the account of the feeding of the 5,000. In both cases, Jesus instructed the people to sit down, took the food and gave thanks (or blessed the food, which is a synonym for this Jewish customary practice), broke the loaves, and gave them to the disciples, who then gave them to the crowds. Mark's account follows up the distribution of the loaves with the same process of blessing the few small fish, ordering these to be served as well (Mark 8:7).

One notable difference with the earlier miracle is that the people do not sit on green grass in the feeding of the 4,000. This would mean that the spring grass had faded and it was at least a few weeks between each of these two feeding miracles.

Jesus' distribution of food is picked up by the disciples (15:37-38)

The conclusion to this miracle was that *"they all ate and were satisfied."* The Lord's provision was satisfying to everyone who ate. The word translated "satisfied" was used for animals who had eaten all they could and wanted no more. It was also used in a spiritual sense in the New Testament for contentment, *"in any and every circumstance I have learned the secret of being filled and going hungry, both of having abundance and suffering need"* (Philippians 4:12). When the Lord provides, it is satisfying.

As in the earlier feeding, the disciples picked up what was left. Just as with the feeding of the five thousand (Matthew 14:20), this appears to again be emphasized by the detail of what was left. What was picked up would soon be a point of teaching by Jesus in Matthew 16:9-10, *"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."*

Many interpreters have correctly recognized the number of baskets that were gathered with broken pieces of bread has significance but conjecture some symbolic meaning to the number. Some view the twelve baskets left over as related to the twelve disciples, and some as related to the twelve tribes of Israel. Once the twelve baskets are viewed symbolically, then the seven baskets are viewed likewise, usually in conjunction with completeness. However, there is nothing in the text itself indicating anything symbolic regarding the numbers.

What actually is in the text is a difference in terms of the baskets that were used to gather the leftover pieces. The Greek word for "basket" (SPYRIDAS) in Matthew 15:37 was woven of rushes, or plants from marshes, and used to carry fish and other food in the Roman empire. Such a basket was used in Damascus to rescue Paul from his Jewish enemies in Acts 9:25. This is not the type of basket used to pick up the pieces left over from the feeding of the five thousand in Matthew 14:20. In that case was a "basket" (KOPHINOUS), that was used by Jewish people to carry kosher food.

The distinction between these two types of baskets was maintained in Matthew 16:9-10, where Jesus refers to the aftermath of the two miracles. Clearly, this supports the assertion that the crowd at the feeding of the four thousand were primarily Gentile, while the crowd at the feeding of the five thousand were Jewish. The number of baskets gathered among the Gentiles was less than the number of baskets gathered among the Jews.

So what the text tells us is that a Jewish crowd of 5,000 men, plus women and children, consumed 5 loaves and 2 fish, and left 12 baskets full, while a Gentile crowd of 4,000 men, plus women and children, consumed 7 loaves and a few small fish, and left 7 baskets full. Therefore, while both were amply provided for, a larger Jewish crowd consumed less and left more, while the smaller Gentile crowd consumed more and left less. The Gentile appetite for the provision by Jesus was more than the Jewish appetite for the provision by Jesus.

This corresponds with the preceding context of the Gentile Canaanite woman, who was eager to partake of the crumbs of what was left over from the ministry of Jesus to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. We see the Jews as only interested in the miracles of Jesus (cf. John 6:26), and the Gentiles as possessing greater faith than the Jews (Matthew 8:10; 15:28).

Jesus departs for Magadan with the disciples (15:39)

Matthew 15:39 is a transitional verse leading to Jesus' rebuke of the Jewish leaders who asked for a sign from heaven in chapter 16. Jesus sends the crowds away and descends the mountain to the sea, where He gets into a boat. Mark 8:10 adds that the disciples accompanied Him in the boat. Both Matthew and Mark include this verse before the interaction between Jesus and the Jewish leaders.

The location of Magadan is unknown. Mark's account instead refers to "*the district of Dalmanutha*" (Mark 8:10). This area is also unknown. It would make sense that this area was on the west side of the Sea of Galilee since they got into a boat to go there and since the following passage involves the Pharisees and Sadducees, meaning that this would have been the Jewish region of Galilee.

The difficulty of locating Magadan led to various later variations of spelling in later Greek texts. Magadan has the oldest and most reliable testimony of the early Greek manuscripts of Matthew. Latin texts of Matthew, along with some church fathers, call this area Magedan. More manuscripts render this location as Magdalan and many more later manuscripts call it Magdala. Magdala is found in the King James Version of verse 39, since it was based upon later manuscripts.

If Magdala is the correct reading, it would refer to the area just north of the city of Tiberias, on the western shore of the Sea of Galilee. However, because the earliest manuscripts do not use that name, it is more likely that later manuscripts changed the area to a place more well known, which is why modern translations have Magadan.

Conclusion

The provision by Jesus for the multitudes was more than a miraculous attestation to His authority. While the feeding of the four thousand was the testimony of God to confirm the message of Christ (cf. Hebrews 2:3-4), it also demonstrated the abundance of God's supply. The Lord is able to provide according to His will beyond what we can consume, regardless of the meager resources available.

Just as Moses (Exodus 16; Numbers 11) and Elijah (2 Kings 4:1-7, 38-44) each performed two feeding miracles, so Jesus did as well. He followed in the line of the great prophets of Israel but in an even more dramatic way. This should have caused the Jewish leaders to recognize that Jesus was a prophet of God who should be listened to, rather than rejected. Those who did follow Jesus were largely doing so for their physical needs only.

Unlike the Jews, the Gentiles were more receptive to Jesus. Some of them exhibited great faith and were positioned in Matthew's gospel as a contrast to the resistance of the Jews to Jesus. This was a foreshadowing of the ministry of the apostles who likewise prioritized the Jews, but found the Gentiles more responsive (cf. Romans 1:16). Matthew 15 is something of a pivot away from the Jewish leaders and toward the peoples of the world.

Jesus led His disciples to the Gentiles in the district of Tyre and Sidon (Matthew 15:21) and to the Decapolis east of the Sea of Galilee. He graciously provided for these Gentiles with His disciples' participation. This began to prepare them for their future Gentile ministry. With the rejection of Jesus by the people of Israel, God's mission for the world will shift from the world coming to the people of God in the nation of Israel, to the people of God going to the world. Therefore, the feeding of the four thousand is a key part of the movement of God's plan away from the nation and their leaders (Matthew 16:1-12) and toward the establishment of the church in God's plan for the world (Matthew 16:13-20).