

The Feeding of the 5000

Luke 9:11-17

The miraculous account recorded for us in this text is one of the most familiar miracles in the Bible, but we must not allow that to make us apathetic or dismissive toward this account. The feeding of the 5000 is a unique miracle and worthy of careful consideration. This is the only miracle that is recorded in all four gospels. Matthew's account is found in Matthew 14:13-21. Mark's account is found in Mark 6:31-44, Luke's account is found here in our text, Luke 9:11-17. And John's account is found in John 6:1-14.

Why is this miracle recorded four times for us? Jesus healed the lame and the blind. Jesus healed lepers. Jesus walked on water. Jesus commanded the wind and the waves, and they obeyed Him. Jesus raised the dead. On the surface, feeding people bread and fish doesn't seem like a particularly noteworthy miracle. Yet it is repeated for us four times.

In this miracle Jesus made natural provision, and through this natural provision Jesus revealed profound spiritual truth. In this account we see Jesus revealed as the good shepherd, the great provider, and the mediator for His people.

I. The Setting (v. 11-12a)

We need to know the setting in order to better understand the events of this passage. Remember, back in verse 10, when the disciples returned to Jesus He took them out into a desert place which belonged to the city of Bethsaida. This city was located at the northern end of the Sea of Galilee, near where the Jordan river enters the lake. It was not a particularly large city, but it was an important city in the region. The “desert” area would have referred to uncultivated land within a few miles of the city that was used for grazing livestock. So the area would have been desolate, uncultivated, unsettled, but close enough to settled areas that travel was not impractical.

Jesus went to this area alone with His disciples. He did not broadcast his movements to the people. He went “privately” as verse 10 tells us.

But in verse 11 we are told that the people found Jesus. “The people, when they knew it [when they knew where Jesus had gone], followed him.” Jesus was still very popular at this time in Galilee. The crowds sought Him out. Even when Jesus slipped away to desolate areas, the people found him and a large crowd went to hear Him teach and see His miracles or be healed themselves.

Verse 11 goes on to tell us what Jesus did when these crowds followed Him out into this desolate area: “He received them.” In Mark 6:34 we are told that Jesus “was moved with compassion toward them, because they were as sheep not having a shepherd.” Christ’s was moved with compassion toward this crowd because He

saw in them starving souls. The zeal these people demonstrated in going to such a desolate place to find Jesus and to hear Him preach indicates the sorry state of Israel at that time. It was as in the days of Eli: “The word of the Lord was precious . . . there was no open vision.” (I Samuel 3:1).

Jesus saw the people as sheep without a shepherd. God used language like this in the times of the Old Testament prophets when Israel had unfaithful leaders. Jeremiah 50:6 says, “My people hath been lost sheep: their shepherds have caused them to go astray, they have turned them away on the mountains: they have gone from mountain to hill, they have forgotten their restingplace.” Ezekiel 34:5, “[My sheep] were scattered, because there is no shepherd: and they became meat to all the beasts of the field, when they were scattered.”

Though Jesus received this crowd as sheep, that does not indicate He thought that everyone in this crowd had genuine faith. Jesus knew what was truly in their hearts. In John 2:24-25, in a very similar circumstance, we read, “Jesus did not commit himself unto them, because he knew all men . . . he knew what was in man.” But Jesus, during this period of His earthly ministry, received the crowds as they came, as they presented themselves to the human eye: as sheep without a shepherd.

The people had flocked to Jesus as a prophet of God, leaving the comfort and provision of their homes and traveling to this desolate area. They sought Jesus

out, though He had purposefully concealed His movements from them. Jesus was compassionate toward them, and received them.

Jesus still receives all those who will come to Him. You must come in humility. You must come as He commands: with repentance and faith. You must lay aside this world and the comfort and provision that it seems to offer. And come to Christ. He will receive you. You will find Him a compassionate Savior.

Verse 11 continues and tells us that Jesus ministered to the people. He spoke unto them of the kingdom of God and healed those that needed healing. Notice again the preeminence of teaching and preaching in Jesus' ministry. Jesus performed many miracles during His earthly ministry. But the miracles were secondary and gave witness to the authority of His primary ministry, which was to preach the kingdom of God.

In Mark 6:34 we are told that Jesus taught the people "many things." He spent a long time in teaching and preaching to this crowd of people.

Verse 12 begins, "And when the day began to wear away." The whole day had been spent in ministry. The need of the people was great. The time Jesus had to minister among them was short. Though Jesus was undoubtedly tired from his constant work, He did not stop. He was diligent to use the time the Father had given Him to accomplish the ministry He had been sent to accomplish.

Verse 11 and the beginning of verse 12 give us the context for the miracle we see in this passage. Jesus with his disciples and this great crowd of followers

were in a desert place. The day had been spent in ministry. Evening was approaching. And as evening approached, we see a great need.

II. The Need (v. 12-13)

As evening approached, the disciples told Jesus to send the multitude away. Notice that this was a group effort: “Then came the twelve, and said unto [Jesus].” They were all there and had apparently come to Jesus with one mind about this matter.

Now look at what they said to Jesus: “Send the multitude away, that they may go into the towns and country round about, and lodge, and get [provisions]: for we are here in a desert place.”

You wonder if they interrupted Jesus to say this to Him. He was ministering to the people, but the day was wearing away and they were in a desolate area. Something needed to be done. Maybe Jesus had forgotten Himself. Maybe Jesus was so caught up in ministry that He had lost track of time. Maybe Jesus was so focused on the spiritual needs of the people that He forgot to think about their physical needs.

Certainly not. Jesus had not forgotten. He was not unaware. We see that clearly in the rest of this text. And the same is true today. Never despair of the Father’s provision. He knows what we need, spiritually and physically. Make use of the means He has provided, be diligent in your labor, do your work as unto the

Lord, for His glory, and rest assured that God sees your need and He will provide for you with what is truly the best for you. The apostle Paul said in Philippians 4:11, “I have learned, in whatsoever state I am, therewith to be content.” May we also learn to be content with God’s provision.

This situation concerned the disciples, and so they said to Jesus, “Send the multitude away.” This was said as an imperative, as a command. “Jesus, you must do this. You must send the crowds away.”

We are often like the disciples in this verse. In matters concerning ourselves we are like Peter when he said to Jesus, “Command me to come unto you.” But when others are concerned, we are often like the disciples on this occasion: “Send them away.”

Jesus knew that He would meet the needs of this crowd. The miracle that happened in this text didn’t surprise Jesus. John 6:6 says, “[Jesus] knew what he would do.” So why did Jesus wait until this late hour to perform this miracle? Why did Jesus wait until this need began to weigh heavily on the minds of His disciples, so heavily that they went to Jesus and told Him that something had to be done: “Send these people away.”

Jesus did this for the benefit of the disciples. His delay made the disciples more attentive to this miracle and more likely to learn from it. By His delay Jesus showed that, though He does not prevent the needs of his people, and though He does not always immediately supply for their needs, He knows about our needs and

He cares. Jesus always has it in His power to provide for the needs of his people, and when the time is right, He will provide.

Let this be an encouragement to you in prayer. Do not despair because your prayer for a specific need has gone unanswered. Do not wonder if God is unable or unwilling to meet your need. Jesus knows. Jesus cares. It is in the power of His hand to supply. And He will supply that which is best for you. Some Christians have experienced peace and health and wealth. Some Christians have experienced unimaginable suffering. But at all times, Christians have experienced God's perfect provision. Around the throne of God, there will not be haves and have-nots. There will only be worship and praise when we consider the perfect wisdom of God in His provision for His people.

At the beginning of verse 13 we see how Jesus answered the twelve on this occasion. He said, "Give ye them to eat." The twelve disciples had recognized this need, brought this need to Jesus, and their solution was to send the people away. Jesus told them, "You meet this need. Feed these people."

Learn from this that when it is in the power of our hand to do good, we should do it. A story is told of D. L. Moody who heard a group of wealthy business men in his church praying that God would meet a need in their congregation. Moody interrupted them and said, "Gentlemen, any one of you could take out his checkbook and meet this need. Then you could stop asking God to provide and could instead thank Him for His provision. There are some things we need to pray

about and seek direction from the Lord. But there are many things that we should just do because God's Word is clear, the need is obvious, and God's provision for us is sufficient for us to help others.

How did the twelve disciples respond when Jesus told them to feed the people? They said in verse 13, "We have no more but five loaves and two fishes; except we should go and buy meat for all this people." To summarize, they said to Jesus, "We can't." — "What you told us to do, Jesus, we have no means to perform. We do not have the provision to meet this need."

And from a human perspective, this is a reasonable response. Verse 14 tells us that this was a crowd of 5000 men. There may have been a large number of women and children present as well. We know from John's account that it was nearly the passover, and many who were a part of this crowd may have been Jewish families traveling to Jerusalem to celebrate the passover.

John's account also give us some more details about the disciple's response to Jesus. From John 6:9 we learn that the 5 loaves and 2 fish did not belong to the disciples, but belonged to a young boy who was part of the crowd.

And in John 6:7 Philip said to Jesus, "Two hundred pennyworth of bread is not sufficient for them, that every one of them may take a little." A denarius, which is the unit of money referred to here, was worth about a day's wages for an unskilled worker. So 200 pennyworth, or 200 denarii was about eight months of

wages. Philip apparently did some quick figuring and determined that even if they had that money, it would not buy enough food for everyone to have even a little.

You can imagine that Judas Iscariot, who held the purse for the disciples, tightened his grip upon it when he heard Philip suggest spending such an extravagant figure. Maybe Matthew, the former tax collector, ran those numbers through his mind and calculated how much food they could actually afford to buy.

But what Philip suggested was impossible. It's very unlikely that Jesus and the disciples had 200 denarii. And even if they did, it's unlikely that any of the near-by towns or cities would have that much food ready and available for purchase. The disciples had no means to provide for these people.

Remember what the disciples had just experienced. Right before this, Jesus had sent them out to minister throughout Galilee with only the clothes on their backs. Jesus told them not to take anything else with them. No food, no extra supplies, and no money. And during that time of ministry, they did not lack anything. God provided for them.

But the disciples didn't apply that lesson on God's provision to this situation. They looked, not to Jesus, but to themselves. And they knew that they had no means to provide food for this great crowd of people.

Once again, we are often like the disciples in this way: we are quick to forget God's past provision and faithfulness when a new need arises. How quickly we forget! How quickly we give place to worry and fear. That should not be the

case. When a new need arises, whether that's a physical need or an emotional need or a spiritual need, don't look to yourself and despair at your insufficiency. Look to God, our great provider.

In the days of Samuel the tribes of Israel set up a rock for a monument and they called it "Ebenezer" which means "rock of help." When the Israelites saw it they would be reminded of how God helped them and delivered them from the Philistines. So ought we to establish spiritual Ebenezers in our own lives to remind us of God's deliverance and provision in the past and encourage us to trust Him with the future.

In verses 12 and 13 we have seen the need. The need was clear. The disciples on their own had no means to meet this need. Now, in verses 14-17 we will see God's miraculous provision.

III. The Provision (v. 14-17)

Jesus told His disciples, "Make them [the crowd] sit down by fifties in a company." This may have been done to make the distribution of the food easier. It may have been done to make it easy to count the people as a testimony to the greatness of this miracle.

Verse 15 is remarkable. Remember, back in verse 13 when Jesus told the disciples to feed the people, they said, "We can't." But now, the disciples do what Jesus said. The disciples had the people sit as Jesus instructed. This is remarkable

because on the face of it it seems absurd. They have five loaves and two fish. Why is Jesus having the people sit as if to receive food? They have no food to give the people. Yet the disciples obey and have the people sit according to Christ's command.

Then in verses 16 and 17 Jesus performed a miracle. First, Jesus took the meager provision the disciples had managed to find and He blessed it. Jesus thanked the Father for this provision and praised Him for it.

Here is a good example for us to follow when we sit down to eat. We should thank our heavenly Father and praise Him for our food. Paul wrote about meat in I Timothy 4:4-5, "For every creature of God is good, and nothing to be refused, if it be received with thanksgiving: For it is sanctified by the word of God and prayer." Giving thanks to God before meals is not vain repetition, like the ceremonial washing of the Pharisees. Rather, it is following the example of our Lord and worshiping God as our provider.

We are told in verse 16 that when Jesus blessed this food He looked up to heaven. There is both physical and spiritual truth to apply here. First, physical: There are many physical modes or positions in prayer that are proper. There are times when it is appropriate for us to pray with our heads bowed. There are times when it is appropriate to pray kneeling or even stretched out on the ground. There are times when it is appropriate to pray when we are engaged in some other activity, like walking or driving or working with our hands. There are times when it

is appropriate to pray like Jesus did on this occasion, with his face lifted up toward heaven. There are many appropriate ways to pray.

There is also spiritual truth to apply here. When we pray we look to heaven and acknowledge that what we receive, we receive from God. When we lift up our eyes in prayer we are reminded that we look to heaven for our help, and not to the things of this earth. We owe God everything. All the physical blessings we enjoy. All of the comforts of relationships in this life. All our spiritual blessings; our hope, our redemption, our salvation, our inheritance: Everything we have comes from God, and when we pray we look to Him and acknowledge that He is the giver of every good and perfect gift.

After He prayed, Jesus broke the bread and gave it to the disciples to give to the crowd. Jesus broke the loaves, the disciples handed them out, and those 5 loaves and two fish turned into thousands and fed this crowd.

The beginning of verse 17 tells that the people ate until they were full. This was abundant provision. This was a feast. The people ate until they were full.

The end of verse 17 tells us that there were 12 baskets full of leftovers. The need was met with abundance. The people were full and there were 12 full baskets left over.

What are we to learn from this miracle? Why did Jesus perform this miracle? Why is it recorded for us in each of the four gospels? It's wonderful that Jesus fed the 5000, and it's a great demonstration of His power, but is that all there is to this

miracle? Or did Jesus, through this miracle, reveal spiritual truth about Himself? I believe there is more revealed here than just the feeding of the 5000.

We are going to compare the feeding of the 5000 to God's provision of manna in the wilderness and we will see that through this miracle Jesus demonstrated that He was greater than Moses and that He came to establish a better covenant. We need to be very careful when drawing symbolic or spiritual meaning from narrative passages in the Bible. We do not want to twist Scripture to our own destruction and claim it says something that it does not actually say. So how do we know that this is a legitimate connection to make?

First, many of the details in this miracle specifically align with the details we are given about manna in Exodus. Second, John's gospel directly makes this connection.

In John 6:30-31 the people said to Jesus, "What sign shewest thou then, that we may see, and believe thee? what dost thou work? Our fathers did eat manna in the desert; as it is written, He gave them bread from heaven to eat." The day before these people had been fed by Jesus. And they came to Him again, looking for a sign. Specifically, they wanted to be fed: "Give us a sign like Moses. Feed us daily like you fed us yesterday."

What follows in John's gospel is a sermon from Jesus where He claimed to be the bread of life. In John 6:35 Jesus said: "I am the bread of life: he that cometh to me shall never hunger; and he that believeth on me shall never thirst." In verse

33 Jesus said, “For the bread of God is he which cometh down from heaven, and giveth life unto the world.”

And in that sermon Jesus specifically mentions His superiority to Moses. In John 6:32 Jesus said, “Verily, verily, I say unto you, Moses gave you not that bread from heaven; but my Father giveth you the true bread from heaven.” Remember, the crowds had just said to Jesus: “Give us a sign. Be like Moses who fed our fathers in the wilderness.” Jesus pointed out that Moses did not provide that bread, God did. But more importantly, God had provided true heavenly bread for His people: and that spiritual bread was Jesus Christ. So this comparison between Jesus feeding the 5000 and the manna in the Old Testament is a legitimate comparison.

Now going back to our text in Luke 9, what is revealed in this miracle about the person and work of Jesus Christ? First, like Moses, Jesus acted like a shepherd for God’s people. This imagery of Moses as a shepherd is used in Psalm 77:20, “Thou leddest thy people like a flock by the hand of Moses and Aaron.”

In Numbers 27:16-17 as Moses drew near to the end of his life, he prayed, “Let the Lord, the God of the spirits of all flesh, set a man over the congregation . . . that the congregation of the Lord be not as sheep which have no shepherd.”

And we see Jesus fulfilling that same role here in our text in verse 11 when He received the multitude. Remember, Mark’s account says that Jesus was “moved with compassion toward the people because they were as sheep not having

a shepherd.” Jesus Christ is the good shepherd of His people. God used Moses as a shepherd, and Moses spent the last 40 years of his life serving as a shepherd for God’s people, but Jesus is the good shepherd. In John 10:11 Jesus said, “I am the good shepherd: the good shepherd giveth his life for the sheep.” Jesus gave His life for His sheep. As a shepherd of God’s people, Jesus was superior to Moses.

Second, like Moses, Jesus provided for God’s people. As part of God’s ministry through Moses, manna was provided for the Israelites in the wilderness. The miraculous account of the provision of manna is found in Exodus 16. In Exodus 16:3 we read, “And the children of Israel said unto them (Moses and Aaron), Would to God we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the flesh pots, and when we did eat bread to the full; for ye have brought us forth into this wilderness, to kill this whole assembly with hunger.”

Then in verse 4 God said to Moses, “Behold, I will rain bread from heaven for you; and the people shall go out and gather a certain rate every day, that I may prove them, whether they will walk in my law, or no.”

In the verses that follow there are instructions concerning manna: how it is to be gathered, when it is to be gathered, and how it is to be stored. The Israelites were instructed to gather an omer (or approximately 10 cups), for every man. When they actually gathered manna for the first time, those who gathered much, when they measured it found they had an omer. Those who gathered little, when

they measured it, found they had an omer (Exodus 16:18). This was clearly a miraculous provision.

The Israelites were also instructed not to keep any overnight. Those who disobeyed and tried to store it found that it had spoiled. It was full of worms and stank (Exodus 16:20).

On the sixth day, in preparation for the sabbath, the Israelites were to gather twice as much and prepare half of it to eat on the sabbath day. Those who obeyed found that the extra manna kept over night. Those who did not obey went out for manna in the morning and found none, so they went hungry that sabbath (Exodus 16:27).

This miraculous provision of manna continued for forty years, until the children of Israel entered the Promised Land. In Joshua 5:12 we read that the manna ceased when the Israelites crossed the Jordan river and began to eat the grain grown in the land of Canaan. We are blessed to live in a time and area with a super-abundance of food. We usually don't struggle to find food. If anything, we struggle deciding what sort of food to eat. But throughout most of history, one of the great dangers people faced was starvation. And if you have ever known starvation, food security becomes very important to you. This is why the Israelites looked back on the manna as one of the greatest miracles in the Old Testament. This physical need for food was miraculously met every single day. This is why the

crowd asked Jesus in John 6 to give them a sign like the sign of Moses, to provide them with bread from heaven.

Through the ministry of Jesus, God provided bread for His people. God literally provided bread, as we have seen in this miracle. In Exodus, the Israelites faced starvation in the wilderness and they murmured against God because of their lack of food. In Luke 9, the crowd faced discomfort. They were not going to starve to death if they didn't eat that day. It might be uncommon for us to go a day without eating food, but it would not have been uncommon at that time. There simply was not as much food available. The need in Luke 9 was not nearly as desperate as the need in Exodus 16, yet God met the need before the people even asked.

The people had to rise early and go out to gather manna, but Jesus had the people sit down comfortably while the disciples handed out the bread and fish.

The manna was only sufficient for the day. Leftovers would immediately spoil. But when Jesus fed the 5000 there were twelve baskets full of leftovers.

At first glance, the provision of bread in Luke 9 seems superior to the provision of manna in Exodus 16, but there is one major difference. The manna was provided six days a week for 40 years. That's over 12,000 days of manna. Jesus provided bread and fish to the crowd for 1 day.

Which would you rather have?

If God's provision through Jesus was merely physical bread, then God's provision through Moses was superior, but the physical bread in our text pointed to Jesus as the bread of life.

Jesus is the bread of heaven God has provided for His people. Those who partake of Him will never hunger and never thirst. Not hunger and thirst physically, but hunger and thirst spiritually. God's provision of manna through Moses was physical and temporal. God's provision of the Bread of Life, Jesus Christ, for His people is spiritual and eternal. As provider for God's people, Jesus was superior to Moses.

Finally, like Moses, Jesus was the mediator of a covenant for God's people. God used Moses as the mediator of the covenant of the Law. John 1:17 says, "For the law was given by Moses, but grace and truth came by Jesus Christ."

The covenant of the Law was not perfection. The Law is holy, just, and good as Romans 7:12 tells us, but all it can do is reveal the depth of our sinfulness. It has no power to deliver us from sin. Hebrews 10:4 says that it is not possible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins. In Hebrews 8:5 the covenant of the Law established under the ministry of Moses is referred to as an example, shadow, and pattern of heavenly things. And Hebrews 8:7 refers to the covenant of the law as "not faultless," but, according to the promise of God in Jeremiah 31:31-34, it was to be replaced with a better covenant

Jesus Christ was the mediator of that better covenant. Again, John 1:17 says, “For the law was given by Moses, but grace and truth came by Jesus Christ.” In Acts 13:39 we read, “And by him (Jesus) all that believe are justified from all things, from which ye could not be justified by the law of Moses.” As the mediator of a covenant for God’s people, Jesus was superior to Moses.

When we consider the miracle in our text, we do not merely see Jesus feed 5000 people, as wonderful and glorious as that is. What we see is further revelation about Jesus Christ: His identity and His ministry.

He is the good shepherd who laid His life down for His sheep.

He is the great provider. As the Bread of Life, He brings full spiritual provision to His people. Those who partake of Him will never hunger or thirst again.

And He is the great mediator. He came to establish a better covenant between God and man. The Law shows us our sin, but cannot deliver us from sin. Jesus Christ can deliver us from sin. He alone can make peace between God and man. He is the only way to the Father.

The Word of God calls us to action. John 6:14-15 tells us that the crowd was so moved by these events that they sought so seize Jesus and establish Him as a king in Galilee. But the first time Jesus came, He did not come to establish an earthly kingdom. He came to establish the kingdom of God in the hearts of men.

By the grace of God may we be moved as we consider Jesus Christ as He revealed Himself in this passage. If you have never come to Christ for salvation, do so today. Submit yourself to Jesus Christ as King. And as believers, may all of us be renewed in our devotion and worship and praise God for how He has revealed Himself in this passage.