

Matthew 14:13-21

I. Matthew 14:13a – Now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there in a boat to a desolate place by himself.

The last time Matthew told us that Jesus “withdrew”, His withdrawal was from Judea to Galilee and the occasion of this *first* withdrawal was the *arrest* of John the Baptist.

✓ Matthew 4:12 – Now when [Jesus] heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew into Galilee.

Now, at the news of John’s *execution*, I think Matthew is giving us a hint that Jesus is about to begin a new withdrawal – this time from Galilee. We’ll see this withdrawal especially in chapter 15 when Jesus travels to Gentile areas, and then in chapter 16 Jesus will begin to show His disciples that He must go to Jerusalem (16:21). So the “winds of change” are beginning to blow – and though this might seem ominous to us, we know that Jesus is in complete control.

II. Matthew 14:13a – Jesus withdrew from there in a boat to a desolate place by himself.

The “desolate place” was near the village of Bethsaida on the northeast shore of the Sea of Galilee, just on the other side of the inflow of the Jordan River. The Greek word for “desolate” is the word for “wilderness”. So we could translate: “Jesus withdrew from there in a boat to a *wilderness* place by himself.” (This will be important for us to remember.)

III. Matthew 14:13b-14a – But when the crowds heard it, they followed him on foot from the towns. When he went ashore he saw a great crowd...

Apparently, the crowds got wind not only of the fact that Jesus was leaving, but also of where He was going. You can imagine that as they followed Him their numbers probably swelled as they passed any houses or inhabited areas along the way. So when Jesus went ashore, he saw a *great* crowd. Now John tells us that Jesus did actually get there ahead of the crowds and that He had a little bit of time alone with His disciples (on Mark’s “went before them” see Hendriksen and Lenski)... But it wasn’t long before He saw the crowds coming, and so He went out to meet them.

IV. Matthew 14:14b – And he had compassion on them.

Jesus had compassion on the crowds even though they were *interrupting* the rest and solitude that he and his disciples so desperately needed (Mark 6:30-32). Jesus had compassion on the crowds even though we learn from John that they were only seeking Him for *selfish* reasons. Jesus had compassion on the crowds, Mark tells us, because He saw that they were like sheep without a shepherd (Mark 6:34). What a wonderful, compassionate Savior. Certainly, this should encourage and comfort us when we are hurting. And it should also teach *us* to see people as Jesus saw people – not simply as inconveniences or as people who have brought their troubles upon themselves, but rather in light of their genuine *need*. Jesus was always realistic. He knew

the hearts of these people. But instead of becoming cynical and withdrawn (as many of us would have), He was filled with *compassion*.

V. Matthew 14:14b – And he had compassion on them and healed their sick.

Now remember that this is the story of the feeding of the five thousand. But *connected* with this story is Jesus' healing of the sick. As we've already seen, the healing of the sick goes hand in hand with the *proclamation* of the *kingdom*. That's because the healing of the sick is one of the main signs of the *presence* of the kingdom! When John asked if Jesus was the promised king and Messiah Jesus responded:

- ✓ Matthew 11:4-5 – Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, *and* the poor have good news preached to them.
- ✓ Matthew 4:23 (9:35) – [Jesus] went throughout all Galilee, *teaching* in their synagogues and *proclaiming* the gospel of the kingdom and *healing* every disease and every affliction among the people.

So in light of these things, we should already be able to guess what Mark and Luke tell us – not only was Jesus healing the sick here in Matthew 14, He was also teaching and preaching the *kingdom*.

- ✓ Mark 6:34 – [Jesus] began to teach them many things.
- ✓ Luke 9:11 – [Jesus] welcomed [the crowds] and spoke to them of the kingdom of God and cured those who had need of healing.

The only way to truly understand the feeding of the five thousand is to see it *in the light* of the proclamation of the kingdom – which is the rule and reign of God in the Messiah. Remember that Jesus' miracles are *never* intended as bare displays of power, but rather to *instruct* us and *teach* us and bring us to a deeper *understanding* of what the kingdom is all about. Apart from the resurrection of Jesus, the feeding of the five thousand is the *only* miracle that is recorded in all four Gospels. Now all four Gospels do include healing miracles, but apparently it was also important for each of them to include this miracle of *feeding*. Why? Well, because of what it tells us about the kingdom.

VI. Matthew 14:15 – Now when it was evening, the disciples came to him and said, “This is a desolate [wilderness] place, and the day is now over; send the crowds away to go into the villages and buy food for themselves.”

The disciples are not being uncaring and mean. To the contrary! They are being very practical. The crowds need to eat. There is no food here in the wilderness. So send them away so that they can go into the villages and buy what food they can!

VII. Matthew 14:16 – But Jesus said, “They need not go away; you give them something to eat.”

OK. So it's obvious that Jesus has some kind of *agenda* here – some kind of lesson that he wants the disciples to learn. John tells us that even before Jesus went out to meet the crowds, He had already asked Philip:

- ✓ John 6:5-6 – “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 Jesus as any one of us probably would have answered:

- ✓ John 6:7 – Two hundred denarii would not buy enough bread for each of them to get a little.

So now evening has arrived, and Jesus is telling *the disciples* to give the crowds something to eat! Jesus is not playing *games* here. He is very much in *earnest*. But in earnest about *what*? How *should* the disciples be responding to an order like this (cf. 2 Kings 4:42-44)? After the Israelites had left Egypt, they became hungry as they wandered in the wilderness...

- ✓ Exodus 16:4 – Then the LORD said to Moses, “Behold, I am about to rain **bread from heaven** for you, and the people shall go out and gather a day's portion every day.”
- ✓ Exodus 16:32 – This is what the LORD has commanded: “Let an omer of it be kept throughout your generations, so that they may see the **bread** with which I fed you **in the wilderness.**”
- ✓ Psalm 78:24-25 – He rained down on them manna to eat and gave them the **grain of heaven**. Man ate of the **bread of the angels**; he sent them food **in abundance**.
- ✓ Psalm 105:40 – They asked, and he brought quail, and gave them **bread from heaven in abundance**.

So in the Old Testament, God feeds His hungry people in the wilderness with bread from heaven. And now once again, the people are gathered in the *wilderness*, and they are hungry. But this time the *Messiah* Himself is in their very midst, and it is clearly the Messiah's will that the people should be fed. So how *should* the disciples have responded when Jesus commanded them to give the crowds something to eat? They should have said: “Yes, Lord. Just give us the food, and we will obey.” But they didn't yet **understand**, and so...

VIII. Matthew 14:17 – They said to him, “We have only five loaves here and two fish.”

Now if this had just been a case of more people in need of healing, the disciples would have known exactly what to do. But the disciples have not yet fully understood the *meaning* of Jesus' miracles of healing. They have not yet fully understood the meaning of Jesus' teaching and preaching of the kingdom!

IX. Matthew 14:18-19a – And he said, “Bring them here to me.” Then he ordered the crowds to sit down on the grass, and taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven and said a blessing.

What is happening here?!? What is Jesus doing?!? Well, it’s very clear! He’s getting ready to host a meal. First of all, he orders the crowds to sit down. The Greek word for “sit down” is actually “recline”, and almost everywhere else in the New Testament, this word means very specifically to recline at a *table*.

- ✓ Matthew 9:10 – And as Jesus ***reclined at table*** in the house, behold, many tax collectors and sinners came and were ***reclining*** with Jesus.
- ✓ Matthew 26:7 – A woman came up to him with an alabaster flask of very expensive ointment, and she poured it on his head as he ***reclined at table***.
- ✓ Matthew 26:20 – When it was evening, he ***reclined at table*** with the twelve.

When Jesus orders the crowds to *recline*, it’s the equivalent of calling everyone to the table. Only in this case, the table is replaced with grass. *Grass* in the *wilderness*. We may think of the wilderness as dry and barren, but it’s spring time here in Galilee (John 6:4), and so all is *green*. Mark specifically refers to the “*green grass*” (6:39) and John says that there was “*much grass*” (6:10). Instead of saying, “Then he ordered the crowds to recline on the ground”, Matthew says: “Then he ordered the crowds to recline on the grass. And so we find ourselves reclining now in a wilderness that is lush and green.

“And taking the five loaves and the two fish, Jesus looked up to heaven and said a blessing.” The host at every Jewish meal was expected to thank God for the food both before and after eating. The traditional blessing went like this: “Blessed art thou, O Lord our God, King of the universe, who brings forth bread from the earth.” So whatever words Jesus used, this was clearly the prayer before eating, and Jesus is clearly proclaiming Himself the *host* at the meal.

So Jesus has called the people to recline at the table – which in this case is the luxurious green grass of springtime – and as the host at this meal, He has said the blessing. But when Jesus says “Amen”, all He has in front of Him are five loaves of bread and two fish.

X. Matthew 14:13a – Then he broke the loaves and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds.

What? For them to fight over? You see, Matthew still doesn’t tell us about any miracle of power! He simply describes for us the *normal* actions of any host at any meal.

- ✓ Acts 27:35 – And when [Paul] had said these things, he took bread, and giving thanks to God in the presence of all he broke it and began to eat.
- ✓ Luke 24:30 – When [Jesus] was reclining at table with them [the disciples from Emmaus], he took the bread and blessed and broke it and gave it to them.

Jesus calls the people to recline at the table (the luxurious grass of springtime), and then as the host at this meal He says the blessing, breaks the bread, and gives it to the disciples to give to the people.

XI. Matthew 14:13a – And they all ate and were satisfied. And they took up twelve baskets full of the broken pieces left over. And those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children.

Now, wait a minute! We want some details! What just happened? *How* did it happen? *When* did it happen? What did it *look* like? But Matthew doesn't give us *any* of these details because *that's not Matthew's focus*! What Matthew does focus on is the *abundance and liberality* of this feast. "And they all ate and were *satisfied*." They all ate until they were *filled* – until they didn't want anymore. "And they took up twelve baskets full of the broken pieces left over." After feeding so many people from just five loaves and two fish, the fact that there were *twelve* baskets *full* of the broken pieces *left over* does not make the miracle any more astonishing. Once again, Matthew's point is not to make the miracle more amazing, but rather to emphasize the *abundance*, and the lavishness, and the plenteousness of the meal. There was more than enough and plenty to spare! "And those who ate were about *five thousand* men, *besides* women and children!" Jesus fed them all! The point is not simply an amazing miracle of multiplication. The point is a *meal... provided* and *hosted* by the *Messiah*! The point is not simply an amazing miracle of multiplication. The point is the *abundance* and *liberality* of this *meal... provided* and *hosted* by Jesus, the *Messiah*. And, of course, if we were to ask, "Where did this food come from?" there could only be one possible answer. It came from *heaven* (cf. v. 19)... by the power of the Messiah.

Conclusion

So as the Messiah hosts this very simple but very satisfying feast for five thousand plus people out in the wilderness, what were the crowds supposed to see? What were the disciples supposed to be learning about the kingdom? Well, remember in the Old Testament when God fed His people with the bread from heaven? Consider these verses:

- ✓ Nehemiah 9:20 – ***You gave your good Spirit to instruct them and did not withhold your manna from their mouth.***
- ✓ Nehemiah 9:13-15 – You came down on Mount Sinai and ***spoke with them from heaven and gave them right rules and true laws, good statutes and commandments, and you made known to them your holy Sabbath and commanded them commandments and statutes and a law by Moses your servant. You gave them bread from heaven*** for their hunger and brought water for them out of the rock for their thirst.

See how the manna goes hand in hand with the instruction of God's Spirit? See how the bread from heaven goes hand in hand with God's word? We might say that the bread is a symbol of the *word*. The physical provision of bread is the *sign* of God's abundant provisions for our *souls*. And so we read in Deuteronomy:

- ✓ Deuteronomy 8:3 – He humbled you and let you hunger and fed you with manna... that he might make you know that man does not live by **bread** alone, but man lives by every **word** that comes from the mouth of the LORD.

When the Messiah hosts this banquet in the wilderness, it is a picture of the *richness* of the Messiah's *provisions* for His people in *both* body and soul, and *both* now and in the future (cf. Hagner). So this banquet in the wilderness is actually a foreshadowing of the great feast that Jesus will give when He comes again and the kingdom is consummated.

- ✓ Luke 22:28-30 (cf. 14:15; 22:14-16) – I assign to you, as my Father assigned to me, a kingdom, that you may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom.
- ✓ Matthew 8:11 – I tell you, *many* will come from east and west and recline at table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven.
- ✓ Isaiah 25:6 – On this mountain the LORD of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wine, of rich food full of marrow, of aged wine well refined.
- ✓ Revelation 19:9 – And the angel said to me, “Write this: Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb.” And he said to me, “These are the true words of God.”

And what is the meaning of this great feast that we are waiting for? Well, it's the same as this banquet in the Galilean wilderness and the bread from heaven during Israel's wilderness wanderings. Paul writes:

- ✓ Romans 14:17 – For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking but of righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.

The great feast that we are all waiting for when Christ returns will be a sign not only of physical abundance, but also – and *especially* – of the righteousness and peace and joy that will be ours in *fullest* measure. But, of course, we aren't simply waiting for the Messianic banquet of the age to come. We can already look back to the day when the Messiah fed the 5000! This was not only a foreshadowing of the age to come, but a sign that even *now*, Jesus offers to us the blessings of His kingdom rule – not simply the provision of our daily needs (cf. 6:11), but the experience of true righteousness and peace and joy. Jesus said:

- ✓ Matthew 5:6 – Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be **satisfied** [in the same way that these crowds have just been satisfied with bread].

But did the crowds see the true meaning of the meal that Jesus had provided for them?

- ✓ John 6:14-15, 22, 24-26 – 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... On the next day... when the crowd saw that Jesus was not there, nor his disciples, they themselves got into the boats and went to Capernaum, seeking Jesus. When they found him on the other side of the sea, they said to him, “Rabbi, when did you come here?” Jesus answered them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, you are seeking me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves.

You are seeking Me not because you understand the true meaning of the meal that I provided, but because you are so amazed and happy that I could fill your stomachs. So Jesus then went on to say:

- ✓ John 6:27, 30- – Do not labor for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give to you.
- ✓ John 6:30-35 – So they said to him, “Then what sign do you do, that we may see and believe you? What work do you perform? Our fathers ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written, ‘He gave them bread from heaven to eat.’”

You gave us bread for one day. Moses provided manna every day for forty years. What sign do you do? What work do you perform? Can you give us bread *again*? What terrible unbelief!

- ✓ John 6:32-35 – Jesus then said to them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but my Father gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is he who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.” They said to him, “Sir, give us this bread always.” Jesus said to them, “I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst.

When Jesus hosted this banquet in the wilderness, He was revealing to us the richness of His provisions for us in both body and *soul*, both now and in the future. He is picturing for us all the kingdom blessings of today, and foreshadowing all the kingdom blessings of the age to come. And so even *today*, Jesus feeds us in the wilderness. In the barrenness of this spiritually wicked and miserable world, He provides us with an oasis of righteousness and peace and joy. As J.C. Ryle says: “This miracle is a lively emblem of the sufficiency of the [Messiah] to meet the soul-wants of all mankind.” Jesus said, “I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst.” And *in true faith*, may our response be this: Give us this bread always”. What are your soul-wants today? In what ways have you been looking to have those “soul-wants” satisfied? May the feeding of the 5000 remind us that the only place to be filled and satisfied is at the Messiah’s table – and *nowhere* else.

- ✓ Isaiah 55:1-3 – Come, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and he who has no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price. Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy? Listen diligently to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food. Incline your ear, and come to me; hear, that your soul may live.