

## B. The Feeding of the Five Thousand (6:1-71)

John introduced the next episode in his record with his characteristic expression, “*after these things*” (cf. 3:22, 5:1, 7:1, 19:38 and 21:1). This phrase indicates an indefinite time frame, which is consistent with John’s design to produce a thematic account rather than a strictly chronological one. At the same time, he conspicuously constructed this section of his gospel (chapters 5-12) around Israel’s feasts. The preceding incident at Bethesda is notable in that John didn’t identify the particular feast that found Jesus in Jerusalem (ref. again 5:1); in the present episode, however, he noted that it occurred near the time of the Passover (6:4). John also situated it near the Sea of Galilee (cf. 6:1, 22-23; note that Luke’s account locates the setting near Bethsaida), which indicates that the Passover hadn’t yet begun. (All Jews capable of making the journey were obligated to be in Jerusalem for the Passover.) He identified the setting for this miraculous sign, but said nothing about why Jesus returned to Galilee or the course of events during His journey there. It’s likely Jesus had simply returned to His home environs (Jesus was himself a Galilean), but, whatever the explanation, John didn’t think it relevant to mention it.

What was important to John was the episode itself; in this he was in full agreement with the other three gospel writers. For, while both John and Luke omitted Jesus’ second miraculous feeding episode (the so-called “feeding of the four thousand”), all four evangelists recounted this first one. Here again John gave no explanation for why he singled out the one, but a couple of observations are helpful in answering that question:

- 1) First of all, the way John recounted this episode provides insight into the reason he distinguished this first feeding from its counterpart. Characteristic of John’s gospel account is his practice of drawing upon particular events/episodes in Jesus’ life in order to highlight the discourses which sprung from them.
- 2) This is consistent with his overall focus on Jesus as the incarnate *Word*. John understood Jesus to be the Father’s tangible utterance to men: His *actions* themselves spoke to those who observed them, but especially as Jesus interpreted and elaborated on them by His words. Just as it was with the healing at Bethesda, so it was with this episode: This sign was Jesus’ (and His Father’s) *word* to Israel, but it communicated something beyond the miraculous multiplication of fish and bread and the feeding of a large crowd. The act itself *spoke* to those present, but that word required elaboration to be *heard*. The subsequent discourse provides that elaboration, showing that the sign spoke to Jesus as men’s true food – the super-abundant, inexhaustible living Bread which, unlike earthly food, produces and perfects life rather than merely sustaining it.

Another thing to note at the outset is the differences between John’s account of this episode and those of the synoptists. As is typical of their overall accounts, Matthew and Mark closely parallel one another (cf. Matthew 14:13-33; Mark 6:31-52). Luke provided the briefest account, skipping Jesus’ subsequent act of walking on the Sea (Luke 9:10-17). John differs from his counterparts in mentioning Jesus’ conversation with Philip (6:5-7), the source of the loaves and fish (6:8-9), and the people’s design to make Jesus their king (6:14-15). But the most significant difference is that he alone recounted Jesus’ interaction with the multitude the following day. *And he did so, not as an appendix to the miracle, but as its climactic focal point* (6:22-65).

1. Piecing together the four accounts, it seems that this episode took place after Herod had John the Baptist beheaded and immediately following the Twelve's mission among the children of Israel. When they returned, He took them away to a "lonely place" on the "other side of the Sea of Galilee" where they could rest (Mark 6:31-32). Again, Luke mentioned Bethsaida (9:10), but the other descriptions – and the fact that a group of perhaps twenty thousand or more people was present (Matthew 14:20-21) – suggest that Bethsaida was near the rural site where the miraculous feeding actually occurred (cf. Mark 6:45). Word of Jesus' presence had spread throughout the area (6:2), so that when He and His disciples arrived at their destination (Matthew and Mark indicate that they travelled by boat) they encountered a huge crowd already waiting for Him.
  - a. Jesus had travelled to this area seeking solitude and rest for Himself and His disciples away from the constant press of people; instead, He found a vast multitude covering the hillside, eager to have Him minister to them. But rather than being frustrated or resentful, He felt compassion for them as a Shepherd coming upon forsaken, wounded and needy sheep (cf. Matthew 14:14; Mark 6:34; Luke 9:11). And so, when they landed on the shore, Jesus embraced the people and began teaching them and healing their sick. In that way He both proclaimed the gospel of the kingdom and demonstrated its nature and power.
  - b. As the day passed and evening drew closer Jesus' disciples became aware that a problem was looming. They were in a remote place with no food resources and nightfall would prevent the multitude from travelling to nearby villages where they could find something to eat. The disciples may have shared Jesus' compassion; more likely they were worried about what might happen if a massive assembly of hungry people was forced to spend the night together on a hillside. Whatever their motivation, they appealed to Jesus to send the people away before it was too late. Jesus responded by directing *them* to provide food to the crowd (Matthew 14:15-16; Mark 6:35-37; Luke 9:12-13). John focused that interaction on Philip, noting that Jesus' intent was to test his faith, since He already knew what He was going to do (6:5-7). Jesus may have specifically addressed Philip, but it's clear that His test of faith applied to all of His disciples. His directive to feed the vast multitude must have struck them as either a joke or a delusion and their efforts to do as He said only reinforced that He was asking the impossible. After scouring the multitude Andrew could only come up with five barley loaves and two fish small enough for a young boy to carry (6:8-9). But even if they had been the largest loaves and fish anyone could imagine, even a fool could see that they wouldn't begin to meet the need of the thousands gathered before them.
  - c. The facts of the situation showed the task to be impossible, but Jesus wasn't bound by natural limitations. He took the loaves and fish and blessed them and then instructed His disciples to begin distributing them to the people. None of the evangelists explain how the supernatural multiplication occurred, but all of them recalled the same outcome: *When everyone ate and was fully satisfied, the scraps were collected and they filled twelve baskets.*

All four accounts use the same Greek term rendered *basket*, but none provides any elaboration. And there are no other scriptural clues since this noun occurs only in relation to this specific episode (ref. also Matthew 16:9; Mark 8:19). Evidently the kind of basket used that day was of a special sort, likely designed for carrying food and other supplies while traveling. Contextual considerations suggest that these baskets were relatively small, and yet twelve of even the smallest baskets amounted to a much greater volume than five small loaves and two fish. In the end, the leftovers vastly exceeded the original supplies.

2. John continued his account by relating the response of the multitude to Jesus' multiplication of the loaves and fish (6:14-15). As noted above, he is unique among the four evangelists in providing this information. The obvious question is why John included this content while his counterparts omitted it; the people's attempt to make Jesus their king is certainly significant and it seems to be an important part of the episode. One can only speculate as to the reason for the others' omission, but a couple of observations perhaps shine some light on John's decision to include it:

- First of all, Israel's unbelief in the face of Jesus' self-witness is a core theme in John's gospel. His prologue introduced that theme (1:10-11) and it continues throughout his account. Both in proclamation and supernatural signs, Jesus testified to the "good news" that, in Him, Yahweh was establishing His kingdom just as He promised, yet most in Israel did not embrace His testimony (ref. again 2:13-25, 5:1-16; cf. also 6:52-66, 7:1-5, 32-52, 8:12-59, 10:22-39, 15:18-25, etc.).
- Secondly, this attempted coronation echoed Jesus' pronouncement in 5:46. Again, Moses' most explicit reference to Jesus was his prophetic promise of a coming prophet like himself – a chosen leader and mediator who would speak Yahweh's words and to whom the covenant household would be accountable. Here, Jesus' miraculous sign convinced many observers that He was indeed that prophet.

Moses prophesied of Jesus when he promised Israel a future prophet. Some among the multitude that day concluded that Jesus was that individual, but the way they expressed their conviction – and most especially Jesus' response to them – showed that their conviction was misinformed and misguided; they, too, were guilty of believing unbelief.

- a. John didn't explicitly say that the prophet these Jews had in mind was the one promised by Moses. But the fact that it was Jesus' miraculous provision of food which caused them to wonder if He was "the Prophet" points in this direction. For the prophet Moses spoke of was to be one *like him*, and Moses had likewise provided the children of Israel with supernatural food (cf. 6:22-31). Israel had hoped in Moses' prophecy for long centuries and so it was with the Galilean multitude that day. Witnessing Jesus' miraculous provision, their minds would have naturally turned to that hope; could such a wonder-working man – a man who spoke with authority of the coming of Yahweh's kingdom (ref. again Mark 6:34; Luke 9:11) – be other than the long-awaited Prophet?

- b. The greatest challenge to this interpretation, however, is John's indication that the Jews of his day distinguished between the Mosaic prophet and the Messiah (ref. 1:25, 7:40-41). The reason this presents a problem is that these Jews were seeking to make Jesus their *king*, which suggests that they believed Him to be the Messiah. If that's the case, it seems they understood Messiah and Moses' promised prophet to be the same individual. Some have sought to resolve the difficulty by noting that Moses exercised a kind of kingly role as Israel's leader and judge. The argument, then, is that these Jews were affirming Jesus as a prophet *like Moses*, not as the Messiah. The problem here is that John always associates Jesus' regal status with His identity as Israel's Messiah (cf. 1:49, 12:12-15, 18:33-19:21). In the end, the difficulty is easily resolved by the fact that there was more than one view in first-century Israel regarding the Mosaic prophet and the Messiah; while many believed they would be different individuals, others believed that one person would fulfill both roles. It seems, then, that the men in John's account were part of the latter group.
- c. In the end, however, the more important issue is what these men had in mind in attempting to make Jesus their king. That is, what perspective was behind their actions and what outcome were they hoping to achieve? There is no way to be certain, but it's quite possible they were part of the Zealot movement. The Zealots were a sect of political activists whose aim was to restore Israel's independence and sovereignty by driving the Romans and their puppets from Palestine. They wanted to see Davidic rule restored, *but in the way Yahweh had promised in the Scriptures*. The Zealots – as all Israel – understood that the restoration of David's throne and kingdom was going to come in connection with David's royal seed. It wasn't enough to purge Israel of the occupying and subjugating powers; the Son of David – the Messiah – had to be installed on the throne in Jerusalem. Thus Zealotry was as much a *messianic* movement as a political one.

Whether or not these men were part of the Zealot movement, they would have shared the general sense of expectancy that marked Israel at the time of Jesus' birth. The Maccabean revolt had inflamed Israel's hope that the kingdom's restoration was imminent and various messianic figures and movements had arisen since then. John's ministry further heightened Israel's expectation and Jesus picked up that mantle by proclaiming the "good news" of the kingdom and authenticating His message with miraculous signs (cf. Luke 3:15-18; Mark 1:14-15; John 4:19-29, 7:14-31, 37-42; also Matthew 12:15-23, 17:1-12, 22:41-46). All Israel was waiting for the Messiah to come and deliver them from their plight. Rome's domineering hand was everywhere seen and felt and John here underscored the people's fierce longing for their Deliverer: The crowd that day was prepared to *seize* Jesus if necessary and forcibly compel Him to take up the messianic crown and lead Israel against Rome and her Herodian surrogates. But Jesus knew what motivated them and He would have none of it. They were right in their conclusion that He was the Messiah, but He wasn't the sort of deliverer they expected. The triumph of His kingship would come through a supreme act of humiliation and self-giving, not military victory (18:33-36, 19:1-22).