

Sermon 42, The Feeding of the 100, 2 Kings 4:42-44

“There is no blessing to be enjoyed, be it ever so marginal, that does not derive from the reign of God — that is the joy of what it means to be *subdued*.” — L. Michael Morales, *Who Shall Ascend the Mountain of the Lord?*, 233

Proposition: Christ the Bread of Life feeds His people through their obedience but ultimately through His own powerful word.

- I. God’s Servants Can Be Faithful in an Apostate Time, v. 42
- II. God’s Word Is What His People Live By, vv. 42-44
 - A. He Uses Their Work
 - B. He Uses Their Obedience
 - C. His Word Directly Provides
- III. Christ Still Feeds His People

Beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, we come tonight to a little vignette of Elisha’s ministry, in which he multiplied 20 rolls to be food for 100 men. Why was this incident included here? Not simply to tell us how Elisha spent his time as a prophet, or to give us a window into religious activities in the Iron Age. No; this story was written to tell us something about God. It points forward to Christ, who fed His followers twice (at the feeding of the 5000 and again at the feeding of the 4000, miracles literally an order of magnitude greater than this one), and thus reveals to us the generosity of the Son of God, who cares not just for souls but for people, body and soul and all. More than that, it reveals to us the fundamental truth that human beings live not by bread alone, but by the word of God. Finally, we see here Christ’s identity as the bread of life and the firstfruits of the resurrection. Mixed with these, we see the themes of obedience and faithfulness.

Brothers and sisters, Christ the bread of life is in this text. Christ the Word of God is in this text. The day of Pentecost when the Holy Spirit came is in this text. And, the faithful people of God are in this text. The Word of God is the bread of life who generously feeds His faithful people, then and now. And people say the Old Testament isn’t relevant to their daily lives!

I. God’s Servants Can Be Faithful in an Apostate Time, v. 42

Our text describes yet another unnamed Israelite, this time not a prophet nor the son of a prophet, but rather just an ordinary Israelite, a resident of the northern kingdom, from somewhere in the hill country of Ephraim. Last time this territory was mentioned, in 1 Samuel 9, it was simply called “Shalishah.” In this text, it is called “Baal Shalishah.” Does that hint to us that in the centuries since the time of Samuel, the people of Shalishah had voted to add Baal’s name to their locale? We can’t be sure. Yet there is at least a possibility that this territory was loaded with Baal

worshippers, that they held political power locally as Ahab's son Ahaziah did on the national level. Yet despite all that, this text tells us that it is possible to be faithful in an apostate time and even, perhaps, in an apostate place. How do we know? Because this man was dedicated to the worship of Yahweh. He lived in a place named after Baal, in a land whose king was a Baal-worshipper, but he maintained the old-time religion. He still offered the firstfruits, just as God had commanded back in Leviticus 23.

What was this offering? Well, it was simple. God's people were supposed to celebrate Passover, the great festival of redemption from Egypt. Then they were supposed to count 50 days and on that fiftieth day, the Sunday 7 weeks after the Passover celebration, they were supposed to gather the first ripe grapes, grains, and fruits. Then they were to make the grain into bread and bring the other fruits directly to the local priest, where they would be offered as a wave offering and/or burnt offering. They weren't allowed to eat any of the new year's crop until this 50th day celebration, what the OT calls the Feast of Weeks and what the NT calls Pentecost.

What was this celebration all about? It was a reminder to Israel that God provides for them. It was a holiday saying "Not only did I bring you out of Egyptian bondage, but I also feed you. Your crops don't grow on their own. Fertility and agricultural production are not givens; they are gifts." So in short, this was a harvest festival oriented around worshipping God for His gift of food and designed to remind Israel that food was His gift to them. We no longer have to bring our firstfruits to the priest. But we still need to give back to God from what He has given to us. We still ought to pray before every meal. We still ought to give to support the work and witness of our local church and other ministries. We give as an act of worship, reminding ourselves that God gave us everything we have.

But wait! In Lev. 23, God says to bring the offering of firstfruits to the priest! Instead, this man brought them to the prophets. What was wrong with him? Didn't he know what Leviticus said? The answer is that yes, he did — but he didn't want to support the corrupt priests instituted by Jeroboam. He understood the spirit of the law, which intended that the firstfruits go to support the priests and the poor. Thus, he chose not to give his firstfruits to the corrupt official state religion of Israel. Instead, he apportioned them to the sons of the prophets. This was all the more important because presumably this incident took place during the famine mentioned in v. 38. This tells us that if you need to withdraw from the official, government-supported church in order to find true worshippers of God, do it! This man did, and he is clearly being applauded for it. In a dark time, in a hard time, he chose not to support Baal or the bull-worship at Bethel and Dan. He chose to give what he had to support the work and worship of Elisha, the true prophet of God. This tells us that true faithfulness can exist even in a time of apostasy. God's servants need not surrender to the zeitgeist, need not say, 'Well, I guess Baalism is the official religion so I'll just hand my tithe over to it.' No! We have the ability to continue to worship the true and living God.

Do you seek to be faithful to God even when times are hard? Do you continue to thank Him for providing you with food? Do you give your money and your agricultural production to those who are serving God, or to those who are serving the devil?

II. God's Word Is What His People Live By, vv. 42-44

Well, the book of Kings has a characteristic emphasis on the word of the Lord, as we have already seen many times in our series. Yet in this chapter of mighty works, this last verse is the first mention of the word of the Lord. What does this tell us? It tells us that though bread is useful and needful for us, that bread is the product and gift of the word of the Lord.

A. He Uses Their Work

God uses His people's work to provide for their needs. This provision wasn't totally miraculous, and indeed, God's provision rarely is. This man cultivated his ground, harvested his barley, and baked loaves in his oven. When God wants to provide for you, generally He's going to use your work or someone else's work.

B. He Uses Their Obedience

God also uses His people's obedience. Here in our church, we confess "monergism" or "one-worker-ism," by which we mean that salvation is a work of God alone. We don't work with Him to save us; in the first moment, when He gives us spiritual new life, He is the only worker. We don't cooperate with that gift of new life; we are dead. That's why we believe and confess monergism. Yet in that emphasis, what sometimes gets lost is the truth that once you have new life from God, you are able and obligated to obey Him.

God provided for His people through the work of this faithful believer from Baal-Shalishah. And He is providing for you and perhaps for many others through your faithful obedience today.

C. His Word Directly Provides

Yet that obedience, that work, was not enough. These loaves were probably small, not the huge two-pound kind of loaf one can buy in a modern grocery store. They may have been something more like what we would call 20 rolls. They simply were not enough food for one hundred men, and the prophet's servant noticed that right away. What's the point? He asked. Why should I try to feed 100 men with the food of 10? The faithfulness and hard work of this man from Baal Shalishah were not sufficient for even one meal for the crowd. So God provided. It was His word that said, "They will eat and have some left over" — which they did, according to the word of the Lord.

So what is it that you and I live on? Our own hard work, or the word of Yahweh? Furthermore, do you see how this whole passage hangs together? In the context of the book of Kings, it tells us that Baal can't feed his people; his servants suffer famine. But it tells us that at the time when God's people celebrate His provision, He provides. The Feast of Weeks was an annual reminder to God's people that it wasn't their own hard work that ultimately fed them. Rather, it was the generosity of God. The fact that the plants and trees produced was a gift from

Him. And once again, at the time of the Feast of Weeks, that reminder (and the celebration that goes along with it!) were hand-delivered to the school of the prophets that Elisha was leading.

III. Christ Still Feeds His People

Yet there is far more here than we have seen. I told you that Christ the bread of life was in this text. In what sense? Well, Christ feeds His people not only material food (“the meat which perishes”) but Himself, the spiritual food which endures to eternal life. The fact that He provided for the physical needs of this band of prophets on this particular day is a reminder that He can and will provide for the spiritual needs of everyone who calls on Him. This is a preview of His future activity with regard to His people. He gave bread as a sign of the truth that He would give and does give Himself as the true bread.

So what do you live on? What nourishes your body? That question is important, and you need to give attention to your physical diet. But far more important is the question of what you live on spiritually. On what does your soul feed? What nourishes your spirit? Is it Jesus Christ, in His person and work? When you’re down, do you think about Jesus and what He has done? When you’re up, do you rejoice that Christ is such a wonderful savior? When you’re thinking about how to organize your day, do you make sure to set aside some time to spend with Jesus Christ? You need to love and enjoy Christ, to feed yourself on Him.

But did you remember that Jesus is described in the NT as the firstfruits, and that His people are too? He is the first one to be resurrected from the dead to eternal life. Just as the first ripe raspberry on the bush tells you what the rest will be like, so the first human resurrected to eternal life tells you something about what your resurrection will be like. Because someone brought firstfruits to Elisha, you can be assured that you will rise again. Why? Because Jesus is the firstfruits and He rose. You are the firstfruits of this planet Earth, and so you belong to God, and God will not let you perish eternally. He will raise you from the dead to new life.

Furthermore, we need to think for a moment about this Feast of Weeks — or Pentecost, as it is better known. Our passage this evening is about God giving a gift on Pentecost, first to this singular ‘man of God’ and then through his intercession to all of his followers. Sound familiar? Brothers and sisters, God gave bread to the sons of the prophets on Pentecost, and He has given you the greater gift of His Spirit on Pentecost! And indeed, He has given so much of His Spirit that there is enough for all of us, and much left over.

Do you believe in the Holy Spirit? Do you see Him as God’s gift to you? Do you recognize that now you are the firstfruits of Christ, that you belong to God, and therefore that God will use you in His Kingdom — and that He might even use your labor to provide bread for your fellow saints?

It’s tempting to ask how I, as a preacher, can set just three verses of a historical book before so many of you. How can I set so little of God’s word before so many? And yet I trust you’ll agree with me that this passage not only shows God’s generosity and ability to provide for His people when Baal fails, but that it also points us forward to the New Testament fulfillment of the Bread of Life, the firstfruits, Pentecost, and the Spirit.

Our God is the same God who gave this bread to His prophets. He is still generous, still amazing His people with His generosity. In the gift of these twenty barley loaves on a festival day, did the prophets see Christ and the Holy Spirit? Perhaps not. But by faith, we do. We see God's overwhelming generosity to His people, hinted at here and fulfilled in Christ's miracles and on the day of Pentecost when the Spirit came, and we feed our souls upon Him. Serve Christ by the Spirit, praising and glorifying the Father for what He has given — for Who He has given. Amen.