

Jesus Feeds the Five Thousand

(Some thoughts with Dr. Joel Crichlow)

The account of this miracle by our Lord, Jesus Christ is recorded in all four gospels: Matthew 14: 13-21, Mark 6: 30-44, Luke 9: 10-17 and John 6: 1-13. Each author wrote to a different audience and emphasized aspects of the miracle that suited his objective in speaking to that audience.

This is how the account begins in each gospel. All references are from the New International Version (NIV).

Matthew 14:13-14: When Jesus heard what had happened, he withdrew by boat privately to a solitary place. Hearing of this, the crowds followed him on foot from the towns. When Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, he had compassion on them and healed their sick.

Mark 6: 30-34: The apostles gathered around Jesus and reported to him all they had done and taught. Then, because so many people were coming and going that they did not even have a chance to eat, he said to them, "Come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest." So they went away by themselves in a boat to a solitary place. But many who saw them leaving recognized them and ran on foot from all the towns and got there ahead of them. When Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd. So he began teaching them many things.

Luke 9: 10-11: When the apostles returned, they reported to Jesus what they had done. Then he took them with him and they withdrew by themselves to a town called Bethsaida, but the crowds learned about it and followed him. He welcomed them and spoke to them about the kingdom of God, and healed those who needed healing.

John 6:1-4: Some time after this, Jesus crossed to the far shore of the Sea of Galilee (that is, the Sea of Tiberias), and a great crowd of people followed him because they saw the signs he had performed by healing the sick. Then Jesus went up on a mountainside and sat down with his disciples. The Jewish Passover Festival was near.

From these accounts we can conclude that this miracle took place in hilly terrain on the eastern side of the Sea of Galilee. In each account we are given some of the events that occurred before Jesus departed to the area of the miracle.

In Matthew's account Jesus had previously been informed of the beheading of John the Baptist – His cousin and forerunner. Therefore the feeling of sadness and a need for inner reflection could be seen as a motivation to get away to a solitary place. In Mark's account the motivation is the need for rest. This is implied also in Luke's account. In John's account no specific event is given as the reason for heading across the Sea of Galilee.

What is clear is that Jesus identified with our human feelings, and as we will see as the incident unfolds, Jesus can and will adequately address our feelings. Common in each account is the fact that a large crowd flocked Jesus because He was unique and very special; and the objective of the authors was to demonstrate that Jesus was indeed different from any other person.

Jesus knew that the people were flocking Him because they had a spiritual need. They were like sheep without a shepherd. Some needed physical healing. He had compassion on them. He taught them. He healed those that were physically sick. But then they got physically hungry.

Matthew 14: 15-17: *As evening approached, the disciples came to him and said, "This is a remote place, and it's already getting late. Send the crowds away, so they can go to the villages and buy themselves some food." Jesus replied, "They do not need to go away. You give them something to eat." "We have here only five loaves of bread and two fish," they answered.*

Mark 6: 35-38: *By this time it was late in the day, so his disciples came to him. "This is a remote place," they said, "and it's already very late. Send the people away so that they can go to the surrounding countryside and villages and buy themselves something to eat." But he answered, "You give them something to eat." They said to him, "That would take more than half a year's wages! Are we to go and spend that much on bread and give it to them to eat?" "How many loaves do you have?" he asked. "Go and see." When they found out, they said, "Five—and two fish."*

Luke 9: 12-14: *Late in the afternoon the Twelve came to him and said, "Send the crowd away so they can go to the surrounding villages and countryside and find food and lodging, because we are in a remote place here." He replied, "You give them something to eat." They answered, "We have only five loaves of bread and two fish—unless we go and buy food for all this crowd." (About five thousand men were there.) ...*

John 6: 5-9: *When Jesus looked up and saw a great crowd coming toward him, he said to Philip, "Where shall we buy bread for these people to eat?" He asked this only to test him, for he already had in mind what he was going to do. Philip answered him, "It would take more than half a year's wages to buy enough bread for each one to have a bite!" Another of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, spoke up, "Here is a boy with five small barley loaves and two small fish, but how far will they go among so many?"*

There is a problem. It's a remote place, there are thousands of people, and only one boy had lunch. One solution would have been to just send everyone away. Let each one see about himself or herself. In fact we see that one or more of the disciples proposed this solution. But Jesus had an astonishingly creative plan.

Jesus out of His heart of compassion can do for us exceedingly more than we can imagine. In John's account he states that Jesus "*already had in mind what he was going to do*". Could it be that Jesus moved upon the heart of that boy's guardian to prepare the lunch to feed the

thousands? Could it be that Jesus made sure that the boy he chose had an unselfish attitude? After all, why would a hungry boy give up his lunch? Jesus had it all planned. He also has a good plan for our lives. Speaking of the loaves and fish, Jesus said,

Matthew 14: 18-21: "Bring them here to me," he said. And he directed the people to sit down on the grass. Taking the five loaves and the two fish and looking up to heaven, he gave thanks and broke the loaves. Then he gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the people. They all ate and were satisfied, and the disciples picked up twelve basketfuls of broken pieces that were left over. The number of those who ate was about five thousand men, besides women and children.

Mark 6:39-44: Then Jesus directed them to have all the people sit down in groups on the green grass. So they sat down in groups of hundreds and fifties. Taking the five loaves and the two fish and looking up to heaven, he gave thanks and broke the loaves. Then he gave them to his disciples to distribute to the people. He also divided the two fish among them all. They all ate and were satisfied, and the disciples picked up twelve basketfuls of broken pieces of bread and fish. The number of the men who had eaten was five thousand.

Luke 9:14-17: ... But he said to his disciples, "Have them sit down in groups of about fifty each." The disciples did so, and everyone sat down. Taking the five loaves and the two fish and looking up to heaven, he gave thanks and broke them. Then he gave them to the disciples to distribute to the people. They all ate and were satisfied, and the disciples picked up twelve basketfuls of broken pieces that were left over.

John 6:10-13: Jesus said, "Have the people sit down." There was plenty of grass in that place, and they sat down (about five thousand men were there). Jesus then took the loaves, gave thanks, and distributed to those who were seated as much as they wanted. He did the same with the fish. When they had all had enough to eat, he said to his disciples, "Gather the pieces that are left over. Let nothing be wasted." So they gathered them and filled twelve baskets with the pieces of the five barley loaves left over by those who had eaten.

The four gospel writers conclude their reports in almost identical words. Jesus required that the people sit, He said a prayer of thanksgiving for the loaves and fish, He broke the bread and fish and had the disciples distribute to all. No one was denied a meal, there were even twelve baskets of leftovers. How astounding!

Matthew, Mark, Luke and John included the account of this miracle in their gospels in order to further highlight the supernatural character of Jesus. Indeed, a key theme in their writings was the divinity of Jesus.

When Jesus was baptized by John, Matthew 3: 17 states: *And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased."* Mark 1: 11 states: *And a voice came from heaven: "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased."* Luke 3: 22 states: *and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven:*

“You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.” Jesus is in these accounts identified as a person of the triune God – Father, Son, Holy Spirit.

In John 1: 1 we read: *In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.* This is followed by John 1: 14: *The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.*

The gospel writers presented to us God in the flesh – Jesus Christ. The miracle of feeding the five thousand was just another piece of evidence to support their belief in Jesus, Son of God, with whom nothing is impossible. Jesus can meet all our needs in straightforward ways and in astonishing ways.

One widespread need that we all have or have had is the hunger for peace. We need a calm for our troubled souls. Jesus can and is willing to give us that peace. He says in John 14:27, *Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.*

It is for us to accept His gift of peace. How do we accept this peace? We acknowledge that Jesus, the Son of God, through His death took the penalty of our sins; that He is ready to forgive us when we express sorrow for our sinful behavior and commit to turning from our sins with His help. Then, through faith in Him, we can enjoy that peace. The Apostle Paul emphasized this in Philippians 4:7: *And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.*

There is another lesson we can take away from this miracle of feeding the five thousand. Think for a while of the impact this miracle might have had on the boy who surrendered his lunch. In John 6: 9 we hear Andrew saying: *“Here is a boy with five small barley loaves and two small fish, but how far will they go among so many?”* At the end of the dinner the boy must have been overwhelmed. His lunch fed thousands of people and there were even leftovers. This happened because he surrendered his little to Jesus. Jesus can do great things with our little when we give it all to Him.