

**THE FEEDING OF THE FIVE THOUSAND**  
(John 6:1-14)

After these things Jesus went over the sea of Galilee, which is the sea of Tiberias. <sup>2</sup> And a great multitude followed him, because they saw his miracles which he did on them that were diseased. <sup>3</sup> And Jesus went up into a mountain, and there he sat with his disciples. <sup>4</sup> And the passover, a feast of the Jews, was nigh. <sup>5</sup> When Jesus then lifted up his eyes, and saw a great company come unto him, he saith unto Philip, Whence shall we buy bread, that these may eat? <sup>6</sup> And this he said to prove him: for he himself knew what he would do. <sup>7</sup> Philip answered him, Two hundred pennyworth of bread is not sufficient for them, that every one of them may take a little. <sup>8</sup> One of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, saith unto him, <sup>9</sup> There is a lad here, which hath five barley loaves, and two small fishes: but what are they among so many? <sup>10</sup> And Jesus said, Make the men sit down. Now there was much grass in the place. So the men sat down, in number about five thousand. <sup>11</sup> And Jesus took the loaves; and when he had given thanks, he distributed to the disciples, and the disciples to them that were set down; and likewise of the fishes as much as they would. <sup>12</sup> When they were filled, he said unto his disciples, Gather up the fragments that remain, that nothing be lost. <sup>13</sup> Therefore they gathered them together, and filled twelve baskets with the fragments of the five barley loaves, which remained over and above unto them that had eaten. <sup>14</sup> Then those men, when they had seen the miracle that Jesus did, said, This is of a truth that prophet that should come into the world.

**John 6:1-14**

We have here the record of Jesus feeding five-thousand men with five loaves and two fishes. This miracle is the only part of Christ's life that is recorded in all four gospels. John usually does not record what was already recorded by Matthew, Mark and Luke. However, this rule of thumb is broken here. And he does so, perhaps because he wants to set the stage for his great "Bread of life" discourse which follows in John 6:22-59. This "Bread of Life" discourse is found only in John.

The Setting for the Miracle

- I. It occurred "after these things."

Our text says that this miracle occurred "after these things." In terms of John's Gospel, Jesus fed the five thousand men after he went up to Jerusalem for an unspecified feast of the Jews. (John 5:1) At this feast, Jesus healed the lame man who was lying on a porch at the pool of Bethesda. (John 5:9) Then, Jesus was questioned by the Jewish hierarchy about working on the Sabbath day and Jesus told them in no uncertain terms that he was God and he could heal on the Sabbath day if he wanted. And then it says, "After these things Jesus went over the sea of Galilee."

But John doesn't tell us how long after these things. It seems like it may have been weeks or months later when Jesus fed the five-thousand. We can learn more about the events which immediately precede this miracle from the synoptic gospels.

- A. It was after a trip to Nazareth. (Matthew 13:53-58)
- B. It was after the death of John the Baptist. (Matthew 14:1-12)
- C. It was after the disciples returned from missionary work. (Mark 6:7-13, 30)

II. It occurred in a desert area outside of Bethsaida. (Luke 9:10)

So, Jesus was somewhere in or near Nazareth in Galilee when the disciples returned to report on their missionary journeys. And about that time John the Baptist was beheaded and Jesus heard of it and our text says that Jesus (and the disciples, in Mark 6:32) took a ship and went over the sea of Galilee. That is, Jesus boarded a ship on the southwestern coast of the Sea of Galilee (somewhere northeast of Nazareth) and went across the sea to a city called Bethsaida on the northern coast. (Luke 9:10)

The Sea of Galilee is also known by other names. Our text says,

*Jesus went over the sea of Galilee, which is the sea of Tiberias.*  
John 6:1

The sea of Galilee became known as the sea of Tiberias later in the first century. It is also referred to as Lake Kinneret (Hebrew word kinnar means harp referring to its shape) and as the Lake of Gennesaret. (Luke 5:1) The sea of Galilee is 13 miles long and 8 miles wide at its widest point. It is 33 miles in circumference. The Jordan river runs from north to south and flows right through the Sea of Galilee. The Sea of Galilee is 693 feet below sea level. It is the second lowest lake on the earth. The lowest lake on the earth is the Dead Sea some 60 miles to the south. The Sea of Galilee is fresh water and the Dead Sea is salt water.

So, Jesus crossed the Sea of Galilee and came to port in Bethsaida. Now our text says that Jesus went up into a mountain. (John 6:3) But in the other gospels it is described as a desert place. (Matthew 14:13; Mark 6:31; Luke 9:10) Now when we think of a desert, we think of sand and cactus and a hot, blazing sun. But the greek word, eremos, means a wasteland or a deserted place. And so, it appears that Jesus took his disciples outside the city of Bethsaida, up into a mountain to a deserted place. And he did this so that he could have privacy with his disciples. (Luke 9:10) You will notice in verse two that a great multitude had followed him when he went across the Sea of Galilee to Bethsaida. Apparently they ran around the perimeter of the lake to Bethsaida.

III. It occurred because a multitude followed him into the mountain.

*When Jesus then lift up his eyes, and saw a great company come unto him, he saith unto Philip, Whence shall we buy bread, that these may eat?*

John 6:5

After, Jesus and the disciples went up into the mountain, it wasn't long before a hoard of people followed him up. John describes them as a great multitude in verse two, a great company in verse five. And in verse 10 we are given an approximate number – 5000 men. Now Matthew tells us that this was just the number of men, and that there were women and children as well. (Matthew 14:21) So, if there were an equal number of women as men that would be 10,000 people. And then if there was one child for every man and woman that would be another 5000 children. If this is correct, then there may have been 15,000 or more people who followed Jesus into the mountain.

At this point in Jesus' ministry, he could not maintain any privacy or secrecy about his whereabouts. As soon as anyone found out where he was, word passed throughout the cities.

*When Jesus heard of it, he departed thence by ship into a desert place apart: and when the people had heard thereof, they followed him on foot out of the cities.*

Matthew 14:13

This multitude that were following Jesus were following him for a specific reason. They were following because they had seen his miracles.

*And a great multitude followed him, because they saw his miracles which he did on them that were diseased.*

John 6:2

It would have been better if they were following him because they wanted to serve him. But generally, they wanted to be served. They wanted Jesus to service their needs. And, It would have been a better motive if they had wanted to be healed of their spiritual diseases. But the sad truth is that they followed him because of the miracles which he did.

IV. It occurred just before the Passover Feast.

Jewish Passover was in March or April. And this is either the second or third Passover Feast of his public ministry. Jesus would be crucified at the next Passover. At the next Passover, the true Lamb would be sacrificed.

I am sure that the disciples had returned from their missionary journeys for the purpose of reporting back to Christ and then attending the Passover in Jerusalem. And Jesus and the disciples might have enjoyed a little rest before they went to Jerusalem. But, there was no rest for Jesus any more. His privacy could not be maintained.

So, that is the setting for the miracle. Now, let's look at,

#### The Miracle Itself

*When Jesus lift up his eyes, and saw a great company come unto him, he saith unto Philip, Whence shall we buy bread, that these may eat?*

Take note first of,

I. The Notice that Christ Took of the Multitude.

Jesus lifted up his eyes and saw. When Jesus was seated up on this mountain, he was enjoying a peaceful time with his disciples. I am sure that they were telling him how they had healed the sick on their missionary journeys and how God had blessed them. They were telling him how they also had experienced the power of miracles. And I am sure they were very excited.

And then Jesus looked up and saw thousands of people coming up the mountainside. Now these were mainly poor people, ordinary people, because these are the kind of people who always make up the multitude. There may have been a member or two of the Sanhedrin. There may have been a mayor of one of the cities or a rich landowner. But since there was a multitude, we can be sure that mostly they were poor and ordinary and needy.

And Jesus took note of them. He lifted up his eyes and saw them. Here we have the Lord of Glory, taking note of the poor and lowly. And this should serve as an example to us. We should also learn how to condescend to men of low estate. Christ values the souls of the poor as well as the souls of the rich. And so should we.

II. The Question Jesus asked of Philip.

He saith unto Philip, Whence shall we buy bread, that these may eat?

We don't get the full story from John. When you read John, you get the sense that when Jesus first saw them coming he asked Philip about buying bread to feed them. But it appears from the other gospels that Jesus spent all day teaching them and healing their sick. (Matthew 14:14, 15; Mark 6:35-37; Luke 9:11-13) It was a long day of ministry and as the day began to wear away (Luke 9:12) the disciples

wanted to send the people away. And it is apparently then that Jesus spoke to Philip and asked, "Where shall we buy bread?"

Now Philip was one of the original disciples who had been with Jesus from the beginning. He had seen Jesus turn water into wine. He had seen the many miracles which Jesus had done. And when Jesus asked Philip where they could buy food, you would have thought that Philip might have said, "Lord, if you will, it is easy for you to feed so many people." But it doesn't seem that this possibility crossed the mind of Philip. Poor Philip, he was just like the rest of us; weak in faith, limited in his thinking to the natural rather than the supernatural.

But, why do you think Jesus asked this question of Philip? Did Jesus suspect that there was enough money in the bags to buy food for so many? And the answer is obviously, No. Jesus knew that he and his disciples had no such money. And therefore, he asked Philip this question to try the faith of Philip. Jesus knew exactly what he would do.

*And this to prove him: for he himself knew what he would do.*

John 6:5

See also,

*Known unto God are all his works from the beginning of the world.*

Acts 15:18

From the beginning of the world, Jesus has known how he is going to deliver us. If you are in distress, your deliverance has been planned from all eternity. If you are penniless and destitute, your deliverance is well known unto Christ. If you are sick or afflicted in any way, your deliverance is well in hand. There is no need for panic or desperation for Jesus knows exactly what he will do for you. And Jesus knew what he would do for this multitude. But Philip didn't know. And Jesus asked Philip this question to put Philip to thinking, "How are we going to feed this many people?"

### III. The Answer of Philip

*Two hundred pennyworth of bread is not sufficient for them, that every one of them may take a little.*

John 6:7

We are not sure how much bread 200 pennyworth would have purchased. But it is clear to Philip that it was not enough. It was just impossible to finance so many people. If there was a corner market, there would not have been enough bread to feed so many. And there was not enough money in the bag.

### IV. The Answer of Andrew

*There is a lad here, which hath five barley loaves, and two small fishes: but what are they among so many?*

You will notice here that the faith of Andrew is not any greater than that of Philip. Andrew found a boy who had five barley loaves and two small fishes and Andrew despaired because it is obviously not enough. "What are they among so many?"

You have heard the old saying, "Necessity is the mother of invention." At this point, the disciples are scouring the crowd to see what food is available. And Andrew finds one little boy with a little food. He has five barley loaves and two small fishes.

Now loaves of bread were not like we would buy at the grocery store. A loaf was a little bun, probably smaller than the size of a hand. And the word used for fishes here is specifically a tiny fish – like

a sardine. It was a little bite-sized fish. And when Andrew tells Jesus of this he is almost embarrassed to mention it. "What are these among so many?"

#### V. The Directions of Christ.

Jesus told the disciples to make the men sit down. I am sure that this meant make the men and the women and children sit down.

Now you remember that Jesus first tested Philip's faith by asking "Where shall we buy bread?" Now he tests the obedience of the disciples. In effect, Jesus told the disciples to call the people to the dinner table, when the disciples well knew that there was no dinner.

Sometimes the Lord calls us to his service when there is no earthly reason to believe that we can accomplish such service. The Lord simply says "Go" and we must go, trusting Him. And he told the disciples to seat the people.

Note the wonderful providence of God.

*There was much grass in the place.*  
John 6:10

When Jesus calls you to dinner, he prepares for you a table. And early that spring he caused the grass to grow. And he caused the grass to be lush and thick. And when the people went to sit down, there was much grass there.

*Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies.*  
Psalm 23:5

Mark's Gospel tells us that Jesus had the disciples seat the people in ranks of hundreds and fifties. (Mark 6:40) It was necessary to organize the people so that the food could be properly distributed.

#### VI. The Distribution of Christ

*Jesus took the loaves.*  
John 6:11

Jesus took the five loaves and the two small fishes. I suppose they were in a basket or some container. And Jesus took the basket into his possession.

And he gave thanks. This is to show that we should be thankful for that which we are given. If we have plenty to eat we should be thankful. If we have but little to eat, it is still our duty to thank Him for what we have.

Jesus began to distribute the bread and fish to the disciples. It appears that the disciples each had a basket. And the disciples came one by one to Jesus and he filled their baskets with food. And then the disciples went in an orderly fashion to the people. And it appears that the baskets of the disciples never emptied.

Now notice that this was an "all you can eat" buffet.

*And Jesus took the loaves; and when he had given thanks, he distributed to the disciples, and the disciples to them that were set down; and likewise of the fishes as much as they would.*  
John 6:11

All of these people were hungry, but some of them were probably starving. Some of them may have had no food at home. And when the disciples came by with their baskets, they told the people, "Eat as much as you like." And the people ate until they were filled. (John 6:12)

Someday we will understand how we are lavished with the bread of life. Jesus is not skimpy in serving us his grace each day. He tells us to eat until we are full. And the baskets of his grace are never found empty.

After every man was filled, the disciples gathered up the fragments. And the fragments filled twelve baskets. This is to show us that the provision of God is more than sufficient. It is more than enough. There is not a short supply of the grace of God. When you have tasted and eaten well of the grace of God, there is yet more left over. He has forgiven you ten thousand times and there is yet more grace left over than when He started.

#### VII. The Response of the People

Notice that the miracle was not concealed to the people.

*Then those men, when they had seen the miracle that Jesus did, said, This is of a truth that prophet that should come into the world.*

John 6:14

Apparently, the miracle was open and displayed to all. Everyone saw that the baskets never emptied. And they were amazed. And they believed that Jesus was that prophet who should come into the world.

I am sure that some left with saving faith and others left with something less than saving faith. It is possible to believe in Christ as a miracle worker and still not commit to him. Many in Jerusalem believed on him when they saw the miracles which he did. But some fell down in adoration of Him. And surely many of these went home with saving love in their hearts for Jesus.