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**Series: The Miracles of Jesus**  
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**Text: John 6:1 – 14; Luke 9:10 - 17**  
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**A Miracle For Sifting**

**T**he Gospels tell us that there were two miraculous feedings. The *first* is the one we are dealing with in our text (and in Matthew 14:13 - 21; Mark 6:30 - 44; Luke 9:10 - 17), and the second one occurred later and in a different location (Matthew 15:32 - 39; Mark 8:1 - 9). The second feeding is different, not only in the number of people fed, but also because it has a *definite* purpose. On that occasion the people had been with Jesus for three days without food—the miracle stemmed from Jesus' compassion (cf. Mark 8:1 - 3). When we examine the first feeding miracle, one that is the property of all four Gospels, "It *appears*," writes A. B. Bruce, "to be a miracle without sufficient reason. It cannot be said to have been urgently called for by the necessities of the multitude."<sup>1</sup> The people of the first miracle had been with Jesus only part of one day, and were not at a great distance from their homes and surrounding villages (cf. Luke 9:12). What, then, was the *purpose* of the miracle in this case? Was it simply done to show that Jesus was generous in His miracle working? Was it a miracle done simply for the effect it had on the people? There are those today who claim that miracles are absolutely necessary for evangelism, and apart from participation in miracles, people will not be converted.<sup>2</sup> How does this claim square with the miracle of the first feeding?

**I. THE SETTING**

The death of John the Baptist at the hands of King Herod has just occurred (cf. Matthew 14:13). The apostles have recently returned from their first mission (cf. Luke 9:10) and are in need of a much needed rest (cf. Mark 6:30). John tells us the Passover was at hand. This is the second of three Passovers mentioned by John (cf. 2:13, 23, 11:55ff.), his reason, notes D. A. Carson, "for including this aside is not so much chronological as theological."<sup>3</sup> This theological motive will be evident in the flow of this chapter. The news about Jesus spread, and a "great multitude followed...." There is abundant testimony, especially by John, that the crowds followed the Lord because they saw the miracles. "Some few, perhaps, were in doubt and suspense," writes J. C. Ryle, "wondering whether He who wrought such miracles could possibly be the Messiah. The great majority probably 'followed' from that vague idle curiosity and love of excitement, which are the principles that gather nearly every crowd in the world."<sup>4</sup>

**II. THE SITUATION**

Upon seeing the crowd, Matthew tells us that Jesus "was moved with compassion toward them and He healed their sick" (14:13). The large number of people is probably due to the fact that since the Passover was approaching, there would be "Passover—pilgrims" on their way to Jerusalem.<sup>5</sup>

- A. The Disciples. The usual response to interruption is consternation—which is evident in the attitude of the disciples—they want Jesus to send the crowd away (cf. Matthew 14:15; Mark 6:35, 36; Luke 9:12). Jesus apparently saw in the peoples' perpetual coming to Him as an opportunity for ministry.<sup>6</sup>
- B. Jesus' Response. Jesus asked a question (v. 5) in order to "test" (PEIRAZO, to try or prove. The word can be used in a sense that expects failure.<sup>7</sup>) Jesus knew what He would do. The disciples' answers betray the fact that they can only think at the level of the market place. The only possible supplies on hand were the property of a small boy—five small barley loaves and two small fish.<sup>8</sup> Jesus orders the disciples to have the people sit down in groups of hundreds and by fifties (cf. Mark 6:40). John's mention of "green grass" indicates that the event took place in late March or early April, before the hot Summer sun burns the grass brown.

**III. THE SIGN**

"Jesus therefore took the loaves." Luke adds, "looking up to heaven" (9:16). There are two points underscoring the miracle itself:

- A. The Thanksgiving. The translation "give thanks" is from the Greek participle EUCHARISTESAS (from which the English "eucharist" is derived). This blessing was probably the common form of the Jewish Thanksgiving, "Blessed art thou, O Lord our God, King of the universe, who bringest forth bread from the earth."<sup>9</sup>
- B. The Distribution. The disciples were the medium of this act of distribution. All the people ate and were satisfied—and there was food to spare—twelve baskets full. This number is significant. It was the Jewish custom to collect left overs. The fact that it took twelve baskets (a point all four Gospels underscore) is an allusion

to the twelve tribes of Israel and Jesus as the One who supplies their needs.

#### IV. THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THIS SIGN

When the people saw the sign, they declared that Jesus was the long awaited “Prophet” (one like Moses, Deuteronomy 18:15) and intended to take Jesus and make Him king. It is interesting to note that in the Synoptics Jesus first sends away the disciples and then dismisses the crowd. “It is difficult to resist the impression that he thought that it would be easier to persuade the crowd to go home, if the disciples were not there; which suggests that perhaps the real sympathies of the disciples were with the hopes and wishes of the five thousand rather than with the purposes of Jesus.”<sup>10</sup> The result of the miracle was NOT a surprise to Jesus. On the contrary, Jesus, comments Bruce, “wished to extricate both Himself and His disciples from the foolish enthusiasm of the multitude, an enthusiasm with which, beyond question, the disciples were only too much in sympathy.”<sup>11</sup>

**CONCLUSION:** First, people are willing to embrace that which will prove beneficial to themselves. Like the Lord in the O.T.—God gave the people food in the wilderness to test them and reveal their heart (Deuteronomy 8:2). People will follow Jesus, if it is to their personal advantage—and Jesus declared the true motive of their hearts (John 6:26). What they wanted, Jesus would not give—but what Jesus offered, they would not receive (John 6:60 - 66). The miracle was designed to sift—not to convince. Its purpose was to reveal the reason for following Christ. Second, as Rick Phillips has observed, “What was Jesus getting at when he fed all these hungry people? Here is what Jesus himself said:

‘I am the bread of life. He who comes to me will never go hungry, and he who believes in me will never be thirsty.... Here is the bread that comes down from heaven, which a man may eat and not die. I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. This bread is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world.’ (John 6:35, 50 – 51)

This is not about how to feed the poor, much less about eating a wafer after a priest has spoken a few lines of Latin over it. Jesus is referring to a relationship with him, to faith in him and in his work. ‘He who comes to me will never go hungry, and he who believes in me will never be thirsty.’ That is what this is about, coming to Jesus and believing on him, so that people dead in their sins might have life, everlasting life. That is the hunger of which he spoke and the food he had in mind. ‘I am the bread of life,’ he said. ‘This is the bread that came down from heaven. Your forefathers ate manna and died, but he who feeds on this bread will live forever’ (John 6:58). Jesus is, as John the Baptist foretold, ‘the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world.’ (John 1:29).”<sup>12</sup>

#### ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> A. B. Bruce, *The Training of the Twelve* (rpt. Kregel, 1971), pp. 122 - 123.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. John Wimber, *Power Evangelism* (Harper and Row, 1986), pp. 39 - 46. Wimber, argues that merely preaching the gospel is not enough. Those who are converted apart from miracles are inadequately converted and therefore stunted in their spiritual growth!

<sup>3</sup> D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John* (Eerdmans, 1991), p. 268.

<sup>4</sup> J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thought on the Gospels, III* (rpt Zondervan, 1947), p. 330.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Alfred Edersheim, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah, I* (Longmans, Green, and Co., 1899), p. 679. John Laidlaw, *The Miracles of Our Lord* (Baker, 1956), points out that the high number of men present is due to the crowd of Passover—pilgrims, who would be mostly male, p. 77.

<sup>6</sup> F. D. Bruner, *The Church Book; Matthew 13 - 28* (Word, 1990), p. 527, points out the abruptness of the disciples with Jesus. “They are clearly upset. They do not preface their command (!) to Jesus with **the usually** respectful ‘Lord’. There is no respectful address at all. They simply tell Jesus almost literally the time of day, where he is, and so what he should do.”

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John* (Eerdmans, 1977), p. 343. However, D. A. Carson, correctly I think, points out that the word is neutral and is entirely appropriate here, op. cit p. 269.

<sup>8</sup> Barley bread was very coarse, usually eaten only by the very poor. The word for small fish—OPSARIA—is found only here and in John 21. It may have been a familiar Galilean word locally used by fishermen to denote a pickled or dried fish used as a relish. Cf. B. F. Westcott, *The Gospel According to St. John* (rpt. Baker, 1980), p. 213.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. D. A. Carson, op. cit., p. 270. This is why the Synoptics use the word “bless”, while John has “give thanks”.

<sup>10</sup> T. W. Manson, *The Servant Messiah* (The University Press, 1961), p. 71.

<sup>11</sup> A. B. Bruce, op. cit., p. 127.

<sup>12</sup> R. D. Phillips, *Mighty To Save: Discovering God's Grace In The Miracles of Jesus* (P & R, 2001), p. 147.