

**“The Feeding of the 5,000”**  
**John 6:1-15**  
**June 18, 2000**  
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**Text Comment**

As you may know, the miracle of the feeding of the 5,000 is the only one of the Lord’s miracles that is reported in all four gospels. This is the fourth of the seven signs that John records in the central section of his gospel, often referred to as the “Book of Signs.” And this sixth chapter is the only chapter in which John treats the Galilean ministry of the Lord Jesus, which, as we said, is the primary focus of Matthew, Mark, and Luke.

- v.1 In the OT it was called the Sea of Kinnereth, which means “lyre” (the musical instrument) because of its shape. In A.D. 20 Herod Antipas founded a city on the western shore and called it Tiberias after the Roman emperor of the same name. Gradually the name was transferred to the lake though, probably not much among the common people who lived in the villages around the lake. But, by the time John wrote his Gospel, many would know the lake by that name.
- v.3 The term the NIV renders “a mountainside” may not refer to any particular mountain but merely to the hill country or the high ground on the eastern side of the lake, what we today know as the Golan Heights.
- v.4 The reference to the Passover being near is a chronological reference, of course. But it is much more than that for John. He has already said that Jesus is the Lamb of God. In the bread of life discourse that will follow this miracle, in vv. 25ff. Jesus will be represented as the true bread, his flesh as the bread of life that must be eaten if one is to be saved. The Passover, by the time John wrote the Gospel, has been taken up into and superseded by the Lord’s Supper, where the bread of life is eaten in the symbol. So John is connecting the account of the miracle which follows with the Passover and its meaning as a picture of redemption through Jesus Christ. What is more, the Passover season was the most intensely patriotic season of the year. It is no wonder then that in vv. 14-15 the Jews should think of the political implications of a Jewish prophet with powers such as Jesus just displayed. The remark in v. 4, in other words, sets the stage for the meaning, the theology of the miracle of the feeding of the 5,000, in what way it is a “sign,” a picture of something.
- v.5 Philip was a natural one to ask such a question because, as we have learned in 1:44, he lived in nearby Bethsaida.
- v.9 Only John among the four gospel writers mentions Philip and Andrew by name – the others refer generally to “disciples – and only John mentions that the boy’s loaves were barley loaves, the inexpensive bread of the lower classes. The fish, no doubt little more than a tidbit, think of pickled small fish, were added to the lunch to make the coarse bread more interesting.

- v.10 All the gospels make the point that 5,000 was the number of adult men present. That means, that adding women and children, there may have been several times that number actually present to be fed.
- v.11 The word for “gave thanks” is the verb form of the word “Eucharist.” Many readers of John’s Gospel would not fail to make the connection, though, truth be told, John does not take advantage of every possible way of relating the miracle itself to the Lord’s Supper. For example, he doesn’t mention that Jesus “broke the bread” as Mark does. John’s emphasis falls rather on the supply of food: everyone ate as much as he wanted and there was still much left over.
- v.13 Indeed, there was much more left over than there had been at the beginning. All four gospel writers mention the number twelve which must be significant: there is enough food for all the people of God, the twelve tribes of Israel. There is enough left over, but no waste by the express command of the Lord. The gathering up of the food is a sign of its preciousness. (Rutherford's point)
- v.15 It is not hard to imagine the scene. This extraordinary work of divine power, 5,000 men there to see it, at the most feverishly nationalistic time of year: it all fanned the flames of Jewish national pride and hopes for deliverance. If the first prophet, Moses, had led Israel out from under the dominion of Egypt, the second, greater prophet that Moses had prophesied would come, could deliver the Jews from Rome. Jesus, who, of course, was a King far greater than the Jews ever realized, would have nothing of their making him into their kind of king and simply withdrew.

The Lord himself will give us an explanation of this miracle as a “sign,” a revelation of himself, in the great “Bread of Life” discourse that begins in v.26. We will wait until then to treat the feeding of the 5,000 as a revelation of Jesus Christ the Savior of the world and as a working out of the meaning of the Passover. We will also consider then the various responses to the miracle on the part of the people. But there are other implications of this great miracle and one in particular I want to consider this morning.

You are aware, of course, that this miracle, as all the other miracles of the Lord Jesus reported in the four gospels, has been submitted to rationalistic critique. In some ways, this miracle even more than the others because this miracle, when we try to picture it, when we try to imagine the manner of it, completely baffles our understanding. And in this way this miracle, even more than the Lord’s other amazing miracles, is a demonstration of his great power! Exactly what happened? Luke gives us the impression that the disciples circulated among the people distributing the food they had received from Jesus and as they returned for more, there was more to be distributed. But exactly how the food multiplied, none of the gospel writers even tries to tell us. As Archbishop Trench wrote, in his celebrated study of the miracles of the Lord, “It is true wisdom, to leave the indescribable undescribed, and without so much as an attempt at the description.”

Think of the miracle itself. How do you think it happened? What would you have seen?

The church father, Hilary [*De. Trin.*, iii, 6] writes this:

“...the method eludes our powers of observation. Five loaves are offered and broken; while the Apostles are dividing them a succession of new-created portions passes, they cannot tell how, through their hands. The loaf which they are dividing grows no smaller, yet their hands are continually full of the pieces. The swiftness of the process baffles sight; you follow with the eye a hand full of portions, and meantime you see that the contents of the other hand are not diminished, and all the while the heap of pieces grows. The carvers are busy at their task, the eaters are hard at work; the hungry are satisfied, and the fragments fill twelve baskets. Sight or sense cannot discover the mode of so noteworthy a miracle. What was not existent is created; what we see passes our understanding. Our only resource is faith in God’s omnipotence.”

There is the thought and there is the scandal of this miracle to the unbelieving mind. What you have here in a special way, to the greatest degree, is an event that, if believed, **must be the work of supernatural power, a power virtually of creation itself. Accept that this is true, and you accept all the Bible says about Jesus Christ.** The power that could explain this is nothing less than omnipotence itself.

If one cannot believe in such a thing, obviously there needs to be some other explanation. But what explanation is there for an account so artlessly and so emphatically given in all four gospels. Well, some have thought the miracle took place only in the hearts of the men. Christ’s example influenced the others, who had selfishly hoarded their food, to share it with everyone else and all had enough to eat. Others think that it must have been some sort of sacramental meal that happened, where everyone got just a tiny piece, but he considered it enough. Then, later, so the thinking goes, the story gradually took on its miraculous overtones. Strip those away and we get back to what really happened.

Well, of course, that isn’t what the gospel writers themselves say happened, and they were eyewitnesses of the event. Such ordinary events as skeptics say lay behind the gospel account of the feeding of the 5,000 would never have produced the terrific response that the gospel writers all say it did. The feeding of the 5,000 is a turning point in the Lord’s ministry leading first to the attempt to make him king and then to a more decided rejection of him when he failed to accept the role the people planned for him.

What our Savior did was a true miracle, one of the most astonishing he ever performed, though he did a great many astonishing things. But, you see, it is only as astonishing as it seems from a certain vantage point, looked at from a particular viewpoint. If we take to be true John’s assertion that Jesus Christ is God, the creator of heaven and earth, then, amazing as this miracle is in some senses, it is hardly difficult to believe. The creator of heaven and earth is surely able to create some more bread!

This is the point that Augustine made on several occasions in his writings about the miracles of the Lord.

“A great miracle, but we shall not wonder much at what was done, if we give heed to him that did it. He who multiplied the five loaves in the hands of them that brake them, is He who multiplies the seeds that grow in the earth, so as that a few grains are sown and barns are filled. But because He does this every year no one marvels. Not the inconsiderableness of what is done, but its constancy takes away admiration of it.”

And, in another place he writes, “Because his miracles by which he governs the whole world, and administers the universal creation, have become cheap by their constancy, so that scarcely any man deigns to mark the marvelous and stupendous works of God... Men marvel not at what is greater, but at what is rare.

This is, of course, the basis of modern skepticism about God and Christ and heaven and hell. They cannot see God, have not seen a miracle, and so do not believe they exist. There is the assumption that one can account for the world and what happens in the world without recourse to God or to a supreme intelligence or to a sovereign ruler over all things. Modern men may modestly admit that they don’t yet know how to explain all things in the world, but they think that someday they will be able to explain them and without recourse to God. And if you can explain the origin of the world and of man himself without recourse to God, -- if the world and what happens in the world are the products of merely natural forces, and undirected natural forces -- then, surely, it is impossible to believe a story such as we have read this morning.

In the book I referred to last Lord’s Day morning at the baptism, Paul Vitz gives an account of his own pilgrimage to faith in Christ. He was an atheist in college and remained one through graduate school and discovered Christianity in his early thirties in the very secular environment of academic psychology in New York City. Reflecting later on those years of his unbelief he admits that his reasons for being an atheist and skeptic were largely superficial and lacking in serious intellectual and moral foundation. But, he is convinced that this is widely true, especially of young people today. One of the reasons was, of course, evolution, which he believed in. He admits, “Of course, I never seriously investigated the evidence for this view or questioned it in any way.” And that was in part because his teachers all held to these naturalistic and materialistic views and he wanted to be like them and to have their approval. And, he is candid enough to admit, atheism was personally convenient to him. “The fact is, in the powerful secular and neopagan world of today, it is quite inconvenient to be a serious believer. I would have had to give up many pleasures...and was unwilling to do so.” “As Stanley Jaki has put it, ‘None other than Aldous Huxley singled out sexual license as the chief immediate benefit to be derived from agreeing with the *Origin of the Species*.’” Vitz’s view in those days was the same that Mortimer Adler, the well-known American philosopher, admitted was his own. On several occasions in famous books Adler had made the case for religious belief and then himself stopped short of a personal commitment. To become seriously religious, he acknowledged, would require a radical change in his way of life, a basic alteration in the direction of day-to-day choices as well as in the ultimate objectives to be sought or hoped for, and, he admitted, “the simple truth of the matter is that I did not wish to live up to being a genuinely religious person.” [*Faith of the Fatherless*, 130-138] Glad to say, in recent years Mortimer Adler, like Vitz before him, has become a Christian.

But, of course, these men have described the typical problem. It is this very conclusion that makes the theory of evolution so destructive of Christian faith and, we would say, of the truth about the world. Evolution gives people the comforting illusion that the world can be explained without recourse to God. And that is a conclusion they want to be true on other grounds, not least because it leaves them free to live as they please. But is evolution, is naturalism, is a world without God true? No, of course not. And the evidence is mounting on all sides that it is not true and that the universe and human life itself give abundant evidence of their, shall we say, miraculous origins.

I recently read a fascinating review of a book by two University of Washington professors, *Rare Earth: Why Complex Life is Uncommon in the Universe*. The review was itself written by a University of Washington professor and a Christian, Guillermo Gonzalez. If you remember the flap that the book caused earlier this year, you will remember the gist of the book. It was a sudden high flier on Amazon.com's most popular books and was lavishly reviewed in the *New York Times* of February 8. The thesis of the book is a direct assault on the dogma of the SETI Institute, that is the "search for extraterrestrial intelligence", which was the love-child of the late Carl Sagan, spawned the popular movie "Contact", and has enjoyed the support of the media and government funding for the last two decades. You know the thinking of SETI. Accept the likelihood of evolution and it seems then also likely that life must have originated in many other places in the universe besides the earth. You hear people say this all the time.

The book *Rare Earth* tells precisely the opposite story. Its argument is that there are a great many factors – astronomical factors, chemical factors, biological factors – that must be satisfied within very narrow ranges for complex life to exist, so many factors and such narrow ranges that the *New York Times* review was entitled: "Maybe We are Alone in the Universe, After All." Christians scientists have been saying this all along, of course, but no one has paid any attention. Now, however, as the evidence accumulates, people are forced to reckon with it. The two professors who wrote the book are not Christians and want to avoid any suspicion that their work may prove a help to "fundamentalists" and the "religious right." They are left with the conclusion that, as one of them put it, "We are just incredibly lucky. Somebody had to win the big lottery, and we were it." [*Touchstone*, (June 2000) 36-38] Guillermo Gonzalez writes, "In other words, it's just the same old appeal to chance and large numbers (or a very long period of time). Some of [their] other answers, however, indicated to me that [they] might be open to the possibility of design in the fundamental constants of nature."

But, this is not the only place where evolutionary assumptions are wobbling or beginning to topple. Evidence for design in nature is accumulating apace and is being forced upon the attention of an unwilling scientific community. There is a great deal of disharmony, even ill-will, in the evolutionary community today, precisely because they feel threatened and they do not appreciate members of their own guild drawing attention to the problems with the theory. The greater they perceive the threat to be, the more shrill their reply. Witness the case of the Kansas School Board some months ago.

We are eager to see that house of cards tumble, of course, because we want men and women to be challenged in a new way to account for themselves and for their lives. And we want them to be forced to read the Bible from the vantage point of someone who knows that the world did not happen by accident, nor did they. There is a God whose wisdom and power alone can account for the world as it is and human beings as they are.

For, you see, accept that the world is a creation with a creator, and one must read John 6:1-15 in a different light. One may not, to be sure, end up a believer in Jesus Christ. The Jews believed that God created the world, but they wouldn't believe in Jesus Christ even though they saw him perform miracles such as this one. There are many theists, people who believe in the existence of God, who do not believe in Jesus Christ as God the Son. Such is the tenacity of human rebellion and unbelief.

But, accept a real creation and the evidence of the creator's hand at a thousand points in nature, ***accept that nothing less than divine power can account for the world and the life of human beings***, and the account of the feeding of the 5,000 is, at a stroke, made plausible. Divine power is everywhere to be seen, wherever we look. Astonishing power is found everywhere we look in the universe -- from the wheeling galaxies to the immense complexity of the interior of the atom. It may be unusual for us to see it in such a case as the feeding of the 5,000, but, given the claim that Jesus Christ is the creator of the world, there is nothing implausible at all in this account. Read some of the new works on intelligent design and the evidence of the astonishing complexity of life and the perfection of design everywhere to be found in nature, and the Lord's feeding 5,000 men with a few morsels of food seems no longer to be anything that remarkable to believe. As C. S. Lewis put it, "The miracles in fact are a retelling in small letters of the very same story which is written across the whole world in letters too large for some of us to see." [God in the Dock, 29]

Do you see how profoundly one's worldview affects his or her reading of the Bible? Do you see how our sense of the universe around us, of our world, of our ordinary life, determines what we can believe about the working of God in the world? Multitudes of people in our culture do not accept that what John tells us here really happened. And they don't because they have been led to believe that the religious view of the world, a view of the world that sees it as God's creation, is itself implausible. Once that view is abandoned, as the truth should force men to abandon it, one can read, honesty compels one to read John 6 with an open mind. It doesn't mean that miracles such as the feeding of the 5,000 happen in our day. They do not. They have hardly ever happened in the world. But it means they could well happen and that when an account as chaste as this one, written by an eyewitness, and confirmed by so much that commends the honesty and the accuracy of the Bible, there is every reason to believe it to be true.

I give you all of that to make a point to you, even you Christians who do not doubt but know that Jesus really did feed 5,000 men in such a miraculous, mysterious, marvelous, and supernatural a way. You know that God's almighty power has left its mark, its witness all over this world that he made. You know that Jesus Christ is God the Son and the Creator of the world. The miracles he performed amaze and delight you, but you have no difficulty accepting that they happened as the good and honest men who wrote the gospels say that they happened. But, now consider what this demonstration of his infinite power must mean for you and me.

That same Jesus Christ dwells with *you* by his Holy Spirit. He cares for *you*. He provides for *you*, as he promised he would. "I will never leave *you* or forsake *you*" he said. And, "my strength is sufficient for *you*." Think of his power on display in this miracle! No wonder Paul would speak of his "incomparably great power" and his "mighty strength." Just by willing it so the bread multiplies -- how we do not know -- and the fish as well. This is the last thing the world wishes to hear about Jesus Christ. They are happy to speak of his wisdom, his goodness, his compassion. But they never think of his power. For Christ without power, a toothless Christ is no threat to them. The very last thing the world wishes to hear about Christ is that he is omnipotent, able to bring his will to pass over all the objection and opposition of men. They find no offense in Jesus until they hear the Scripture say: "who can endure the day of his coming and who can stand when he appears?" But not so Christians! They know their Savior is all-powerful. But, do we ponder that fact as we should? Do we take it to heart?

Do you see what this means? Do you feel the force of this truth of the feeding of the 5,000 in your own soul? *You do not lack a thing, brother and sister, because Christ can't give it to you!* The one who fed many more than 5,000 with a few scraps of food and, after all had eaten their fill, had more left over than that which he began, does not lack the power to provide for your needs, all of your needs. If there is that in your life that you are longing for and hoping for and praying for, then surely it is obvious, reading John 6, that Christ does not lack the power to give it to you. He has not wanted to give it to you, he has not chosen to give it to you, but he certainly could if he pleased!

If he can miraculously multiply baked bread and pickled fish, he can bring you a man or woman to love, he can mend your marriage, he can bring peace to your home, he can bring a loved one to faith in himself, he can raise up sick child, or give you children, or a job, he can console and lighten your heart, or arrest the moral and spiritual decay of the world around you. Nothing is impossible, nothing is too difficult for him. Your Savior and your King has unlimited power in his hand.

If he has not given us something we long to have, that must mean, cannot but mean that for reasons of his holiness and justice and love, for reasons of the salvation and well-being of his people, ourselves included, we must either wait longer for these things or do without them altogether. *That is the mind every Christian should always have!* My heavenly father knows I have need of such things, and the Lord Christ is certainly able to meet those needs. If I go without them still, it is because he considers it best that I do! He demonstrated how great his love for us is when he went to the cross. There can be no question about that! Therefore, if he is all-powerful and has not given me something I long to have, then surely it is best that I continue to do without it, unless and until he gives it to me.

This submission to the divine will in the full confidence that God's power could have completely altered our circumstances has always been a mark of deeper godliness and is something every Christian should seek as grace from the Lord's hand and seek to practice in his or her life. And the power which the Lord displayed in his miracles has always been reason for that ready submission.

The feeding of the 5,000 is, in a special way, a study in the power that lies at the hand of Jesus Christ. Imagine yourself there that day. Imagine staring at the Lord as he multiplied the bread and fish so that everyone might eat his fill. Imagine your amazement, your fear, your delight, your stupefaction at what you had seen happen before your very eyes. You would never feel hunger again, the rest of your life, without thinking back to that day and how Christ filled your stomach and everyone else's with a boy's lunch. We were not there, but we know what happened there. And so we know what to think when we are hungry, no matter what we are hungry for! If our Savior is willing, he is most certainly able. If he is not willing, then it must be for the best!