

# Bread in the Wilderness

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## **Text:**

Mark 8:1-10

In those days, when again a great crowd had gathered, and they had nothing to eat, he called his disciples to him and said to them, "I have compassion on the crowd, because they have been with me now three days and have nothing to eat. And if I send them away hungry to their homes, they will faint on the way. And some of them have come from far away." And his disciples answered him, "How can one feed these people with bread here in this desolate place?" And he asked them, "How many loaves do you have?" They said, "Seven." And he directed the crowd to sit down on the ground. And he took the seven loaves, and having given thanks, he broke them and gave them to his disciples to set before the people; and they set them before the crowd. And they had a few small fish. And having blessed them, he said that these also should be set before them. And they ate and were satisfied. And they took up the broken pieces left over, seven baskets full. And there were about four thousand people. And he sent them away. And immediately he got into the boat with his disciples and went to the district of Dalmanutha.

## **Introduction:**

Some may be puzzled by the story we just read. You may be saying to yourself: "But didn't Jesus feed five thousand men plus women and children, and wasn't there a little boy who started the whole thing by giving him his lunch?" You are correct. That did happen, but Jesus also fed 4,000 men on a later occasion. The miracle that we call the feeding of the five thousand is the only miracle of Jesus recorded in all four Gospels. In addition, Matthew and Mark record that on a later occasion he fed 4,000 people. This means that if you read straight through the four Gospels you would read six different accounts of miraculous feedings. Each time it is the same menu, the normal lunch of a Galilean peasant, bread and dried fish.

Some have thought that Matthew and Mark got mixed up and told the same story twice. A careful reading of their accounts however will indicate that this is far from the truth. First, as we will see, there are significant differences in details in the two accounts, and secondly in the passage that follows when they are in the boat going back there is a further discussion about bread, because they had forgotten to bring bread with them. When Jesus overhears the disciple's discussion he asks them:

And Jesus, aware of this, said to them, "Why are you discussing the fact that you have no bread? Do you not yet perceive or understand? Are your hearts hardened? Having eyes do you not see, and having ears do you not hear? And do you not remember? When I broke the five loaves for the five thousand, how many baskets full of broken pieces did you take up?" They said to him, "Twelve." "And the seven for the four thousand, how many baskets full of broken pieces did you take up?" And they said to him, "Seven." And he said to them, "Do you not yet understand?" (Mark 8: 17-21).

This passage makes at least three things clear. Jesus had clearly fed multitudes on two occasions. A part of his purpose in doing this was to teach his disciples a lesson, and thirdly, the disciples had apparently not yet understood what Jesus was trying to teach them. As we meditate on this passage let us begin with the question that we just read: "Do you not yet understand?" What is Jesus trying to teach us? What can we learn from this series of miraculous feedings? Christians throughout the ages have loved these miracle stories and found them rich in instruction. We will not be able to fully harvest their meaning in one sermon, but we can notice some important things that they teach us first about Jesus, then about being a disciple of Jesus, and finally about Jesus' mission.

## **I. They teach us something about Jesus**

Seeing Jesus feed a multitude in the wilderness, we cannot help but think of Moses; Moses who led the multitude into the wilderness where there was no food, and saw God provide manna for forty years. In the Gospel of John, Jesus follows up the miracle with a sermon on the following day. We call that sermon "The Discourse on the Bread of Life". The people had come to him to make him a king. He had no interest in their proposal and said to them: "Truly, truly, I say to you, you are seeking me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves. Do not labor for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give to you. For on him God the Father has set his seal." (John 6:26-27). By this he is signifying to them that his real mission was not to give them physical food, but that he, himself, was the true bread of heaven that would give eternal life.

In so doing, he was also making it clear to them that he was greater than Moses who had given them bread in the wilderness. He tells them: ""Truly, truly, I say to you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but my Father gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is he who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world." They said to him, "Sir, give us this bread always." Jesus said to them, "I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst" (John 6:32-35).

Moses, the great prophet and lawgiver of Israel, had promised that God would send someone greater than he. "The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your brothers--it is to him you shall listen" (Deut. 18:15). Jesus in multiplying the bread and feeding the multitude is indicating that he is the one of whom Moses had spoken. What he is bringing is something far greater than Moses. He is not just the bread-giver, he is the bread. He is the bread of life, the bread come down from heaven to give eternal life to all who partake of him. At the time of the miracle neither the crowd nor the disciples really understand. For the crowd it was a free meal, something they would like to see repeated on a regular basis. This is why they want Jesus to be their king, but Jesus had already rejected that temptation when Satan had invited him to turn the stones into bread. The disciples had seen it as a demonstration of Jesus' power, but had failed to see the deeper spiritual significance.

## **II. They teach us something about discipleship**

Not only do these feeding miracles teach us something about Jesus, they also teach us something about being a follower of Jesus. On both occasions Jesus involves the disciples in his work. The power comes from him, but it only comes after they have provided the material with which he performs the miracle. Now Jesus had the power to simply produce food out of nothing. He had, after all, created the universe so a meal for a few thousand people would not have been all that difficult. But he involves the disciples in what he is doing. He starts with what they have. In the second case, that we have read today, seven loaves and a few fish. From a human point of view this is really nothing. In fact, it would have been easy for them to say: "what we have is so little that it isn't even worth mentioning. We will just keep it for ourselves, then at least we won't go hungry".

The picture here of Jesus taking the little they had and doing something great with it, is an image we find over and over again both in the Bible and in Christian history and biography. This is the way God works. It is his work. He doesn't need us. He could do his work without us, but he has chosen to work through our weakness. Whenever we give to God the little that we have in faith without reserve he multiplies it and brings glory to himself through it.

Some of us may have held back from Christ the little we have saying that it really wouldn't make any difference. That is not true. We can never know what God can do with our small things until we willingly and joyfully give them to him in faith. When we do, he can multiply them in ways beyond anything that we could ever imagine. All of us should ask ourselves the question: "What is God asking me for that I consider too insignificant to be of importance?" Remember the work of God has nothing to do with the greatness of our gift, but it has everything to do with the spirit in which the gift is given.

### III. They teach us something about the mission of Jesus

Not only does Jesus want us to learn something about him, and something about what it means to be his disciple from this miracle, he also wants us to learn something about his mission, the reason why he came into the world.

The first thing that this miracle teaches us about his mission is that it is motivated by compassion. Jesus, himself says to the disciples: "I have compassion on the crowd, because they have been with me now three days and have nothing to eat. And if I send them away hungry to their homes, they will faint on the way. And some of them have come from far away." It was God's love for the world that caused him to send Jesus into the world, and it was Jesus' love and compassion for the world that motivated him in all that he did. Nothing is more consistent in the Gospel story than the compassion of Jesus. This is an important lesson for us. If we are to carry out the mission of Jesus, we must act with compassion towards those to whom we are sent. No other motive is sufficient.

Secondly, we learn that the mission of Jesus is for all people. This is where the second feeding becomes important, and where we must pay attention to the subtle differences between the two. The feeding of the five thousand takes place in Jewish territory, and Jesus has the disciples organize the people into groups that makes one think of Moses' organizing the children of Israel into camps in the wilderness. This time Jesus is in the Decapolis, the Gentile region east of the Jordan. The people were no doubt a mixed group of Jews and Gentiles for the Gentiles too would have been attracted to Jesus for many of the same reasons the Jews were. From an early time Christians have seen in the two feedings Christ coming first for the Jews and then for the Gentiles. This may also explain the significance of the number of baskets left over in each case; twelve in the first case for the twelve tribes of Israel, and seven in the second case signifying the completion of the mission of Christ in the feeding of the nations.

Beyond this we can most likely see in the second feeding the true heart of Christ, a mixed group of Jews and Gentiles because his goal was that in his church there would be neither Jew nor Greek neither bond nor free, neither male nor female, but all would be one in him. (Galatians 3:28).

The final thing we learn about the mission of Jesus is that when he feeds us we are satisfied. Jesus didn't just give them a snack that would keep them alive until they got home. He kept feeding them until no one could eat any more, and then he sent the disciples to take up the leftovers, and in this case there were seven large baskets full. This tells us that Christ gives us all we need. Paul says: "We are complete in him." (Colossians 2:10). The satisfaction that Christ gives is only available in Christ. All other sources are insufficient. This is the reason Jesus

told the Samaritan woman at the well: “He that drinks of this water will thirst again, but he that drinks of the water that I shall give will never thirst.” (John 4:13-14). It is the reason he told the crowd who wanted to make him king after he had fed the 5,000: “I am the bread of life: he that cometh to me shall never hunger; and he that believeth on me shall never thirst.” (John 6: 35).