

# Loaves and Fishes

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## Mark 6: 30-44

The episode in Jesus’ ministry that we will be looking at today takes place after Jesus sends the twelve disciples out on their own to heal and preach the kingdom of God from village to village without him (Recorded in Mark 6:6-12<sup>1</sup>). The final verses of this passage tell us that “*They (the disciples) went out and preached that people should repent. They drove out many demons and anointed many sick people with oil and healed them.*” In the passage Jesus tells the disciples to go only to the people of Israel, not to the gentiles, but to tend the lost sheep of Israel. This is a motif that recurs in our passage of study in Mark 6 about the Feeding of the 5000. I think it is important that we understand the circumstances leading up to this miraculous event.

We have the disciples meeting up with Jesus eager to share with him their experiences of ministering on their own. Jesus had empowered them with the Holy Spirit to heal and teach, and drive out demons – on their own but *under his authority*. Can you imagine what an experience this must have been for them? Up until that point, Jesus had been doing the healing, teaching and miracles. Now it was their turn, and evidently they had been successful. Mark 6:30-33 tells the story of the story of their returning together after being sent aboard. Surely as eager as they were to share their stories with Jesus and amongst themselves, they were exhausted from their ministry as well. They were surrounded by crowds of people wanting their attention, wanting Jesus’ attention. Notice the scriptures say they didn’t even get a moments rest to eat something. Jesus decides it is time to remove to a quiet place.



Read Mark 6:30-34

## A Solitary Place.

Mark specifically emphasized that the feeding of the 5000 took place in a deserted place (vv. 31–32, 35, where the NIV translates the same Greek word, *Eremos*, “quiet,” “solitary,” and “remote,” respectively). *Eremos* is both a noun and an adjective and designates not so much a dry, barren place as an **uninhabited one**: *Lonesome*, i.e. (by implication) *waste* (usually as a noun):- desert, desolate, solitary, wilderness.<sup>2</sup>

In the Old Testament the desert was a place where God **met, tested** and **blessed** his people. After that test, there was always a rest. Remember back to Jesus’ testing in the desert, he rested and was ministered to by angels<sup>3</sup>. Elijah also received divinely provided provisions in the desert<sup>4</sup>, as did the Israelites<sup>5</sup>. The Israelites were alternately tested and received provision,

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<sup>1</sup> This story is told in greater detail in Matthew 10:1-15.

<sup>2</sup> Strong's Talking Greek & Hebrew Dictionary

<sup>3</sup> Matthew 4: 1-11; Luke 4:1-13

<sup>4</sup> 1 Kings 19:5-9

<sup>5</sup> Exodus 15:25; 16:4-5, 11-15; 17:5-7

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namely manna – an appropriate parallel to what we are studying today. As we will study today, it is not only the disciples in need of rest and nourishment.



Put a book mark in our Mark passage and turn to 1 Kings 19:1-8

Here we have the story of Elijah, who despite being God’s powerful prophet who spoke the word of God in truth and performed many powerful and miraculous signs, fled to the desert in fear of King Ahab and his wife Jezebel. He temporarily lost faith in God’s protection. He feared Ahab and Jezebel more than he trusted God, at least for a time. “Evidently Elijah's fear sprang from the power Jezebel possessed. Rather than resting in God for His protection as he had for the past three and one-half years, Elijah ran for his life. He ran all the way through the kingdom of Judah to the southernmost town in the land, Beersheba.”<sup>6</sup> In the desert, he turned to God. He prayed that God would take his life – Elijah’s perspective on the circumstances are different than God’s. God had a different plan. At least Elijah turned to God, sought God in his fear. And God was filled with compassion and was compelled to provide for his faithful servant. Elijah not only found himself in a physical desert, but his faith had landed in one too. Elijah turned to God and God responded with protection and provision. Elijah’s test revealed a temporary lack of faith, but what faith he did have was increased by God’s sending an angel to provide rest and nourishment.

## Sheep without a Shepherd

Let us again to our passage in Mark 6: 30-34. As Jesus and the disciples got in the boat and sailed to another location along the shore, they were observed by the crowds and the crowds followed them. When they landed, Jesus was overcome with compassion for their needs. Notice he is neither angry nor annoyed that they have been pursued instead *he felt compassion*. The Greek word *splagchnízomai* translated as “to feel deeply or viscerally moved with compassion”<sup>7</sup> “is used in the New Testament only by or about Jesus. It suggests something more than mere pity; it suggests actual help. Here the compassion is not just for physical need but for lostness.”<sup>8</sup>

*“When Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd.” Mark 6:34*

We see this same word used in a few other places. It is not just compassion or pity, and then moving on because Jesus is unable to do something to help. He is moved to help because he can do something for them. See the following examples of this compassion that is a compulsion to help:

- Matt 18:27 *“The servant fell on his knees before him.’ Be patient with me,’ he begged, ‘and I will pay back everything.’<sup>27</sup> The servant's master took **pity** on him, canceled the debt and let*

<sup>6</sup> John Walvoord and Roy Zuck, ed., *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures by Dallas Seminary Faculty*, (Colorado Springs, CO: Cook Communications, 1985), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, 527-528.

<sup>7</sup> Spiros Zodhiates, *The Complete Word Study Dictionary – New Testament*, (Chattanooga, TN: AMG Publishers, 1993), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, Under: **σπλαγχνίζομαι**.

<sup>8</sup> Compassion: e.g., Matt 18:27; Luke 10:33; 15:20) — James A. Brooks, *New American Commentary – Volume 23: Mark*, (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1991), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, 107.

*him go."* Here *splagchnízomai* is translated as "pity". The Master modeled this same compassion that includes action exemplified by Jesus.

- Luke 10:33-35 *"But a Samaritan, as he traveled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took **pity** on him. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, took him to an inn and took care of him. The next day he took out two silver coins and gave them to the innkeeper. 'Look after him,' he said, 'and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have.'" Again the same Greek word is translated as "pity". Here we have the Samaritan following through on his sense of compassion, or pity. His compassion moved him to act on behalf of the injured man.*
  
- Luke 15:20 (The Prodigal Son) *"But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him."* This parable comes the closest in paralleling Jesus' compassion as the father in the parable is an image of God himself. His compassion moves him to completely restore his son in every respect, and has the ability and power to do so.

Mark goes on to say, *"he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd. So he began teaching them many things"* (v. 34). Jesus saw the crowd as the lost sheep of Israel, helpless and without guidance, protection or nourishment. Jesus' compassion is a compelling yearning to rescue and provide for all the needs of his sheep, physical as well as spiritual. It is what he has come to do, and he can do nothing less. His compassion is visceral, he feels it deep at gut level and is compelled, he yearns to draw in his sheep, to shepherd the lost and wandering flock of Israel. But the sheep must be willing to accept and receive his help.

This lost sheep motif is found in several old Testament passages referring to times when Israel wandered from God and were in need of shepherding. Often times the sheep motif is connected with a wilderness setting. We see Jesus in this passage as the Good Shepherd. He meets their needs first of spiritual teaching, and then of physical hunger.

- **Numbers 27:15-17** *Moses said to the LORD, "May the LORD, the God of the spirits of all mankind, appoint a man over this community to go out and come in before them, one who will lead them out and bring them in, so the LORD's people will not be like sheep without a shepherd."*
- **Ezekiel 34:5-16** This is probably one of the most significant passages of the "lost sheep" motif wherein God promises Israel that he will be their shepherd. Turn to this passage and read it in its entirety. Vv. 1-4 are spoken in judgment against the religious leaders of Israel whose sin led to the Babylonian Exile. The sleek and strong refer to the powerful in Israel who oppress and burden the weak, the lost sheep. *"I myself will tend my sheep and have them lie down, declares the Sovereign LORD. I will search for the lost and bring back the strays. I will bind up the injured and strengthen the weak, but the sleek and the strong I will destroy. I will shepherd the flock with justice"* Ezekiel 34:15-16 (NIV).

## *“Who Do You Say I Am?”*

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What does Jesus do when he sees Israel scattered and without a shepherd? He has compassion and sets aside his plan for rest with his disciples. He teaches them until it becomes late. (Mark 6:34)

## A Challenge to Faith



Next read Mark 6: 35-44

The disciples encourage Jesus to send the crowd away to find food. But Jesus tells them quite cryptically to feed the crowd themselves. Ever practical and usually misunderstanding Jesus' intentions, they claim they can't feed them. Jesus had just sent these very disciples out to "shepherd the flock", a sort of training exercise in their own discipleship, a preparation for when Jesus would not be present to do the work of the kingdom himself. And they return, and do not comprehend the work at hand. Jesus is testing and encouraging the disciples to meet the needs of the crowds. The disciples fail to comprehend the test of faith in God's provision. Jesus then teaches by example. The disciples scrounge up 5 loaves and a couple of fish – the little lunch of a little boy presented to the disciple Andrew, the brother of Simon Peter according to John 6:8-9). As Jesus tells the disciples to arrange the crowds into groups of 50 and 100, it becomes obvious that he is planning to feed the crowds himself with the paltry provisions brought to Andrew.

*“Taking the five loaves and the two fish and looking up to heaven, he gave thanks and broke the loaves.” Mark 6:41*

Jesus raises the food up to heaven offering a blessing of thanksgiving to God, not so much for the food at hand but for the coming miracle. Jesus models dependence on God for the miraculous provision and trust in his willingness to give it. Then we are told he broke the loaves into pieces and divided the fish into portions and kept on giving pieces and portions of the food to the disciples to dispense to the people. While we are not told exactly how the loaves and fishes multiplied, the imperfect tense of the verb “gave” tells us the bread multiplied in Jesus' hands as he was breaking apart the bread and fish. There is an Old Testament story that prefigures this one in 2 Kings 4:42. We have the story of Elisha feeding 100 people with twenty loaves of bread. Elisha, chosen and anointed by God as a prophet to Israel, did on a small scale points to what Jesus can do on a grand scale. Elisha had some left over; Jesus had the disciples collect 12 basket full of bread and fish. The point of this miraculous sign tells us that God's provision was miraculous and abundant. It more than met the needs of those on the plain that day, in fact it more than met their wants. Mark tells us that all ate and were fully satisfied. Jesus' provision was so abundant the disciples were able to collect 12 baskets of left overs. The crowd had so much to eat that they were willing to part with what remained.

Matthew 14:21 tells us the number of people in the crowd was in excess of 5,000 people. We are told that 5,000 *men* were seated first, separating them from the women and children according to Jewish custom. Estimates for the number of people in this crowd (including the women and children) range conservatively from 10,000 to the more generous 20,000 people depending upon whose commentary you read. The sheer number of people in the crowd not only point to the magnitude of the miracle of

providing food (in abundance); but also testifies to the popularity of Jesus at this point in his ministry. The largest towns in Galilee (Capernaum, Bethsaida, and Chorazin) probably had a population of one to three thousand people.<sup>9</sup> Even the conservative estimate of 10,000 people gathered on that plain attests to the fact that people were coming from far and wide seeking Jesus that day. But popularity doesn't necessarily translate to commitment. John ends his account of this story with another detail not found here in Matthew's account of the story:

*After the people saw the miraculous sign that Jesus did, they began to say, "Surely this is the Prophet who is to come into the world." Jesus, knowing that they intended to come and **make him king by force**, withdrew again to a mountain by himself. (John 6:14-15 Emphasis mine)*

## The Problem of Perspective

Coming into view we have the dichotomy of God's agenda vs. human agenda, the immediate vs. eternal. Jesus had come to fulfill his Father's agenda for the eternal kingdom of God. The Jews were seeking a messiah to bring justice to Israel in the immediate political oppression of Roman occupation. This is a tragic misunderstanding of who and what the Messiah would be. Jesus was tending the flocks and leading the way to the kingdom of God on earth. A spiritual realm within the physical world. Creating and maintaining a proper relationship between man and God, and man and man. The Crowds, while needing this, were seeking a political messiah to lead a revolt and defeat the Romans. Many in the crowd saw Jesus' provision in a different light:

1. Jesus had the ability to attract a huge following who are enthralled with him and willing to do his bidding. He is persuasive and compassionate. In this example alone, he attracted 5,000 men, not a small army.
2. Jesus speaks of a kingdom of God; they don't fully understand the concept of it being a spiritual realm, not a physical political kingdom, but Israel by its very nature has always been a theocracy and Jesus also opposed the oppressive regime of the temple leaders.
3. Jesus provided an unending source of food from virtually nothing. He can provide for a large army.
4. Jesus can heal the injured (without even being present – Centurion's servant)
5. Jesus can raise the dead (the son of the widow of Nain, the daughter of Jairus)

The crowds are expecting a King David to unite the Jews and defeat the Romans. They wanted a messiah to re-establish Israel as an independent nation with a rightful king returning Israel to its glory as it was under King David. An independent nation, with a righteous King, obedience to God, because they are, after all, a nation called to be God's special possession.

Jesus refuses to take on a kingship that his followers are anticipating coming soon. In Luke 9:46 we hear the disciples arguing over who will be greatest in the kingdom. Even Judas, I wonder if the seeds of his "betrayal" might have started here. Did his frustration with Jesus begin with not

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taking control of the situation and becoming king here and now? Was there some disillusionment on his part in the conclusion of these events?

Jesus didn't come to judge or condemn. He didn't come to fight. He came to establish a spiritual kingdom in a physical realm. This concept was unknown to Israel. It was not what they expected; it was not what they understood from the Torah and the Prophets.

They expected an immediate deliverance of Israel in the here and now. What they were getting was a spiritual deliverance available to all who would choose to participate – Jew and Gentile. This deliverance would be stretched over a long time period: beginning with Jesus' ministry and continuing up until our present time – and beyond, until we reach the End of the Age. At the End of the Age Jesus does promise to come and establish a physical and unending kingdom. And at that time there will be judgment and condemnation for those who not only oppress the children of God, but reject Jesus as well.

This feeding of the 5000, and later with the feeding of 4000, begin to mark a change in Jesus ministry particularly among those in his following. After these events, his teachings on the Kingdom of God become more and more difficult to understand, and it becomes increasingly clear that he does not intend to take on the Romans. He begins to lose his following as they become increasingly disillusioned. When Jesus fails to fulfill their expectations, they begin to lose faith in him being their messiah.

## Application

Our tendency is to view life from our immediate perspective. When we don't see God working in our life the way we want him to; or even worse, our life turning a completely different and pain filled direction, we lose faith in who God is. Our perspective is "I trust God when he does what I want", it is not "I trust God in all circumstances because I know that he is faithful in all circumstances." We do not trust God's plan which is eternal and weaves in and out of the lives of other people, other generations. We only see the immediate and do not recognize God's plan outside our immediate needs. We are focused on a horizontal perspective that is almost exclusively self-centered. God's plan involves redeeming all people, drawing everyone to trust and rest in his provision. That is a risky proposition. What we want is an easy, pain-free, joy-filled life where God meets our immediate needs; and every crisis is either non-existent or has a happy ending. When things don't go our way it shakes and tests our faith. If our faith is not deeply rooted in knowing God's word, knowing his promises, knowing how he faithfully and always meets the needs of his children, then our faith weakens and ultimately might fail. We come to trust in our own ability and our own actions because at the very least we see ourselves doing something, rather than waiting on God and seemingly doing nothing. It is a matter of perspective.

When God doesn't answer our prayers and meet our needs the way we expect, we are not allowing for God's perspective. In times of crisis we are so focused on our immediate needs we rarely see beyond them to God's provision. His provisions may not be what we expect or think we want, but they are what we need. Our crises are our time in the solitary places and wilderness. We are overwhelmed by our circumstances and often feel as if no one else can identify with what we are going through. Sometimes we feel abandoned by God. We feel lost and alone. We become the lost sheep, but there is Jesus keeping his watchful eye, and meeting our needs if we will come to him. Those times of crisis are our testing in the wilderness. God is testing our faith and our understanding of who he is. If we turn to him and trust in his provision, he will increase our faith and reveal the depths of who he is to us. He will be our protector, our father, our shepherd, our provider, and our portion. Coming through the desert crisis with God will leave us in a time of rest and provision with God. We will come through the testing knowing that despite the circumstances

of our crisis and the circumstances of its resolution; we are still in the sheep fold and tended by the shepherd. Just as Jesus sought to take the disciples away from the crowds to minister to them, and eventually he did, he will do the same for each of us. The testing is for our benefit – it reveals where our heart and where our faith is. God already knows, the revelation is for our own understanding.

The crowds that followed Jesus and projected their own ideas of what messiah should do and be, were not fulfilled. Some of them may have realized that Jesus was the Messiah, but not the one they thought they wanted. A few may have continued to follow him. Many did not. They were seed cast upon a path that could not take root. When Jesus failed in their perspective, they lost faith. They did not trust in God's provision or timing. God revealed through Jesus that his provision was more than sufficient, and that Jesus was his Messiah. But the majority of the followers would eventually choose to go their own path, and not trust Jesus. This is the tragic irony of the Messiah.