

## 19. The Multiplication of Bread and Fish

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The New Testament contains four histories of the ministry of Jesus. These are the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. These four books do not contradict each other, but they do complete each other. Each gives us details that the others omit, and together they give us a better idea of the life of the Lord. There are two miracles of Jesus that we find in all four gospels—the resurrection of Jesus and the multiplication of five small loaves of bread and two fish to feed a crowd of more than 5,000 people. This miraculous meal is the subject of our study today. Here is the version in Matthew 14:13-21:

“When Jesus heard it, He departed from there by boat to a deserted place by Himself. But when the multitudes heard it, they followed Him on foot from the cities. And when Jesus went out He saw a great multitude; and He was moved with compassion for them, and healed their sick. When it was evening, His disciples came to Him, saying, ‘This is a deserted place, and the hour is already late. Send the multitudes away, that they may go into the villages and buy themselves food.’ But Jesus said to them, ‘They do not need to go away. You give them something to eat.’ And they said to Him, ‘We have here only five loaves and two fish.’ He said, ‘Bring them here to Me.’ Then He commanded the multitudes to sit down on the grass. And He took the five loaves and the two fish, and looking up to heaven, He blessed and broke and gave the loaves to the disciples; and the disciples gave to the multitudes. So they all ate and were filled, and they took up twelve baskets full of the fragments that remained. Now those who had eaten were about five thousand men, besides women and children.”

### THE REACTION OF THE CROWD

As we have said, Matthew, Mark and Luke all tell us this story, but it is the apostle John who informs us of the reaction of the crowd who saw this proof of the infinite power of Jesus Christ. John 5:14,15 says, “Then those men, when they had seen the sign that Jesus did, said, ‘This is truly the Prophet who is to come into the world.’ Therefore when

Jesus perceived that they were about to come and take Him by force to make Him king, He departed again to the mountain by Himself alone.”

When Jesus fed this great multitude, the people thought of the prophet who would come into the world, the one God spoke of in Deuteronomy 18:18. God had said that the prophet He would send would be “like” Moses. At the time of Moses, every day for forty years, God made food fall from the sky. The Israelites called this food “manna.” Now, just as Moses fed the Israelites in the desert in a miraculous way, Jesus, who was indeed the prophet spoken of in Deuteronomy, fed the crowd in a miraculous way.

But the people not only believed that Jesus was the prophet, they also wanted to take Jesus to be king. After all, a king who is capable of feeding thousands of people with five small loaves and two fish would be a wonderful king. Instead of imposing taxes on the people, he would give the people something to eat. With such powers, he would easily gather a large army in order to chase the Roman enemies from the country. This was the dream of the people of Israel. So they wanted Jesus to be king.

Let us say in passing that this small verse in the gospel of John shows the error of a widespread idea concerning the mission of Jesus and his return to earth. You see, many people today teach that Jesus supposedly came two thousand years ago to establish his kingdom and reign from Jerusalem. But the unbelieving Jews who caused his crucifixion supposedly thwarted God's plan. According to this doctrine, Jesus instituted the church as a “Plan B” until his second coming makes it possible for him to be enthroned in Jerusalem and reign on earth for a thousand years.

This idea is contrary in several points to what is taught in the Bible. John 6:15, which says, “They were about to come and take Him by force to make Him king,” shows, for example, that Jesus could have been king of the Jews in a physical sense if he had wanted to be. If his mission had been to reign over a physical kingdom, here was his chance. If

his mission had been to restore the ancient political kingdom of Israel, the Jews would not have rejected him. But the kingdom that Jesus spoke of in his teaching is different from the kingdom that the Jews wanted. Jesus said to Pontius Pilate, "My kingdom is not of this world. If My kingdom were of this world, My servants would fight, so that I should not be delivered to the Jews; but now My kingdom is not from here" (John 18:36). Jesus is not returning to establish a kingdom on earth. He reigns already over the earth from his throne in Heaven. Ephesians 1:20-22 says that God

"seated Him at His right hand in the heavenly places, far above all principality and power and might and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this age but also in that which is to come. And He put all things under His feet, and gave Him to be head over all things to the church."

But John shows us another aspect to the reaction of those who were fed by the miracle of Jesus. The teacher had left the place in the night:

"When the people therefore saw that Jesus was not there, nor His disciples, they also got into boats and came to Capernaum, seeking Jesus. And when they found Him on the other side of the sea, they said to Him, 'Rabbi, when did You come here?' Jesus answered them and said, 'Most assuredly, I say to you, you seek Me, not because you saw the signs, but because you ate of the loaves and were filled.'" (John 6:24-26)

Jesus knew the hearts of all men. He knew their thoughts and what motivated them. He knew that this crowd wanted to receive more free bread. The people were thinking of their bellies and not their souls.

### THE REACTION THAT JESUS DESIRED

Jesus did not want them to make him king, a political leader or a warrior. He did not want the people to follow him so that he could give them bread and fish each day. What did he want? What would have been the right reaction to the miracle he had done?

Let us point out first of all that the word the apostle John uses most often to speak of the miracles of

Jesus is one which literally means "sign." Jesus accomplished "signs." His acts "signified" something. It is true that he had pity on the famished crowd, but he did not multiply the loaves just to fill stomachs. Above all, the miracle was supposed to teach something about Jesus. The crowd was supposed to understand that Jesus is the one who can satisfy all the needs of man, and many of those needs are much more important than physical nourishment. Here is part of their conversation:

"Our fathers ate the manna in the desert; as it is written, 'He gave them bread from heaven to eat.'" Then Jesus said to them, 'Most assuredly, I say to you, Moses did not give 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.' Then they said to Him, 'Lord, give us this bread always.' And Jesus said to them, 'I am the bread of life. He who comes to Me shall never hunger, and he who believes in Me shall never thirst.'" (John 6:31-35)

Just as bread satisfies the needs of man's body, Jesus, the bread of life, satisfies the needs of the whole man—body, soul and spirit. This is what men were supposed to understand in reflecting on the miracle of Jesus.

But the Jews could not see this. As with many people, they thought about things of the earth. This is why Jesus exhorted them with these words: "Do not labor for the food which perishes, but for the food which endures to everlasting life, which the Son of Man will give you, because God the Father has set His seal on Him" (John 6:27). Men today try to attract followers to churches by promising children to women who are sterile, physical healing of illnesses, and prosperity to those who have financial problems. Some offer miracles, others social works, but most put emphasis on physical needs. Jesus told men to seek "the food which endures to everlasting life."

Some verses later he again draws a contrast between manna and the bread of life:

"Your fathers ate the manna in the wilderness, and are dead. This is the bread which comes down from heaven, that one may eat of it and

not die. I am the living bread which came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever; and the bread that I shall give is My flesh, which I shall give for the life of the world.” (John 6:49-51)

The act of eating the manna did not give eternal life to the Israelites. They died afterward. Miraculous healing does not prevent the healed person from dying later. Jobs and prosperity are blessings that are clearly inferior to the heavenly riches promised to Christians. Jesus is worth much more than manna. Forgiveness is better than healing.

### **CONCLUSION**

You need to follow Jesus, to be his disciple. But for Jesus, one is not his disciple if one does not follow him for eternal life—spiritual life. He did not want those who followed him for the loaves of bread and fishes. If you are thinking of being a Christian for a physical or material advantage here on earth, think again. Yes, the Savior is able to give you physical health and financial means to satisfy your needs, but he wants you to follow him in order to find peace with God and true life with Him in eternity. “Do not labor for the food which perishes, but for the food which endures to everlasting life, which the Son of Man will give you.”