

The Feeding of the Two Multitudes

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Within the last year of our Lord's life on earth, He miraculously fed two vast multitudes who had followed Him into the wilderness. The first numbered about 5,000 men, and the second about 4,000.

The feeding of 5,000 is recorded by all four gospel writers (Matthew 14:13-21; Mark 6:33-44; Luke 9:10-17; John 6:1-14). It occurred in the spring, about the time of the Passover. Jesus had been informed of the death of his kinsman, John the Baptist, and the twelve had just returned from their preaching trip among "*the lost sheep of the house of Israel*" (Matthew 10:6). In need of food, privacy, and rest, Jesus took the twelve by boat from the northwestern side of the Sea of Galilee to a secluded area along the northeastern shore, near Bethsaida, slightly east of where the Jordan flows into the Lake. When the crowds on the northwest side saw Jesus and His disciples getting into the boat, and the direction they were heading, they ran along the shoreline, others joining in along the way; thus a large crowd was waiting for Him when He arrived. Though tired and hungry, our Lord attended to their needs, healing the sick and teaching them many things about the kingdom of God.

As evening approached, Jesus asked Philip, "*Where are we to buy bread that these may eat?*" The disciples suggested that Jesus dismiss the multitude so they might go to find food for themselves. Knowing what He intended to do, and to impress on the minds of His disciples what an enormous feat it would be to feed such a vast crowd, Jesus answered them, "*You give them something to eat.*" Then Philip replied, "*Two hundred denarii worth of bread is not sufficient for them, for everyone to receive a little.*" Jesus asked, "*How many loaves do you have? Go look!*" After he found a boy with five barley loaves and two small fish Andrew asked, "*but what are these for so many people?*" Jesus seated the people in companies of about fifty on the green grass, and taking up the loaves and fish, He lifted his eyes to heaven and offered thanks. Breaking the bread, Jesus distributed the food to His disciples, who served the multitude. "*They all ate and were satisfied,*" and had "*as much as they wanted.*" Afterward, Jesus instructed the twelve, "*Gather up the leftover fragments so that nothing will be lost,*" and they collected twelve baskets full of the leftovers. Astounded at what they had witnessed, the people said, "*This is truly the Prophet who is to come into the world,*" and they "*were intending to come and take Him by force to make Him king.*" Perceiving this, Jesus sent the disciples away in a boat while He went alone into a mountain to pray.

Several months later, after visiting the cities of Tyre and Sidon, Jesus returned to the Sea of Galilee and entered Decapolis, a region on the southeast side of the Sea. Here also, Jesus taught many, and healed their sick. Therefore, a great multitude of about 4,000 men, in addition to women and children, followed the Lord into a desolate area and remained with Him three days. Unwilling to dismiss the crowd lest some faint on the way home, Jesus asked his disciples how much bread they had. Seven loaves and a few

fish were found. After the people were seated on the ground, He took the food, offered thanks, and began giving the food to the apostles who distributed the bread and fish among the people. After all were completely satisfied, seven large baskets were filled with the leftovers. Dismissing the crowd, the Lord entered a boat and crossed over the Sea to the region of Magadan (or Dalmanutha) on the west side of the Lake. This event is recorded by Matthew (15:29-39) and Mark (8:1-9).

Some Lessons:

Confirmation of Jesus' Identity and Message Salvation is by faith in Christ (Romans 5:1), and these two signs, as all others He performed, confirmed the identity and message of Jesus. The cornerstone of the faith is the identity of Jesus as Christ, the Son of God. It is the rock upon which the church of Christ rests (Matthew 16:18). Faith in Christ as a result of His signs is the underlying purpose of John's gospel, *"Therefore many other signs Jesus also performed in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these have been written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you may have life in His name"* (John 20:30-31). The feeding of the 5,000 had its intended effect, *"Therefore when the people saw the sign which He had performed, they said, 'This is truly the Prophet who is to come into the world'"* (John 6:14). When Jesus turned water into wine, it *"manifested His glory, and His disciples believed in Him"* (John 2:11). In Jerusalem during the Passover feast, *"...many believed in His name, observing His signs which He was doing"* (John 2:23). Power to perform signs was also given to the apostles; as they carried the gospel *"into all the world ... the Lord worked with them, and confirmed the word by the signs that followed"* (Mark 16:20). Jesus taught, *"unless you believe that I am He, you will die in your sins"* (John 8:24b), and the miraculous feedings of over 9,000 hungry people gave honest hearts every reason to believe in Him.

Jesus' Creative Power When Jesus multiplied the loaves and fish, he displayed absolute power over matter, and the ability to create. Jesus Christ, along with the Father and Holy Spirit, is Creator. John wrote of Christ, *"All things came into being through Him, and apart from Him nothing came into being that has come into being"* (John 1:3). Paul wrote to the Colossians of Christ, *"For by Him all things were created, both in the heavens and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities — all things have been created through Him and for Him"* (1:16). The author of the Hebrew letter extols God's Son, *"whom He appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the world"* (1:2b). These miracles would have been a sign to a thoughtful witness that Jesus was much more than a prophet: he is Immanuel (*"God with us,"* cf. Isaiah 7:14; Matthew 1:23).

The Lord's Compassion What motivated Jesus to feed the two great multitudes? The miracles demonstrate the great heart the Lord has for mankind. Jesus specifically said that compassion was his motive for feeding the 4,000 (Mark 8:2-3). On both occasions Jesus showed mercy toward the sick and suffering, as well as those who hungered (Matthew 14:13-14; 15:29-31). The Lord assures us that the Father is ever mindful of our physical needs (Matthew 6:32), and that Jesus *"will never desert you, nor*

will I ever forsake you,” (Hebrews 13:5b). Peter encourages us to cast “*all your anxiety on Him, because He cares for you*” (1 Peter 5:7).

The greatest needs of man, however, are spiritual. While Jesus was glad to provide food for the two multitudes, he strongly rebuked those who came to him for carnal purposes: “*Truly, truly, I say to you, you seek Me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate of the loaves and were filled. Do not work for the food which perishes, but for the food which endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give to you, for on Him the Father, God, has set His seal*” (John 6:26-27). Moses had given “*bread out of heaven*” to Israel in the wilderness following the exodus, and though it sustained their bodies, it did not save their souls. The true, life-giving bread of heaven is Jesus Christ. His message (the gospel) is God’s mighty power to save, and it is the only way into heaven (John 14:6). The feeding of the multitudes *physically* signifies his ability to feed people *spiritually*, and while the meal sustained their bodies for a few hours, the “*Bread of Life*” will sustain souls through all eternity.

The Role of the Twelve Perhaps there is some significance (or foreshadowing) in the manner in which Jesus fed the multitudes. The Lord gave the food to the apostles, who in turn, gave it to the crowds. The same was true with the gospel, “*the bread of life;*” He placed it into the hands of the twelve, and sent them out to fill the hearts of those who “*hunger and thirst after righteousness.*” (Matthew 5:6; Matthew 28:18-20; Mark 16:15-16).

Jesus Wasn’t Wasteful. The affluence of our age has led to much waste. Too often, the good food, clothing, furniture, and countless other good materials God has graciously given people are briefly used, and unceremoniously tossed away. Although Jesus could produce more food at any time, he said, “*Gather up the leftover fragments so that nothing will be lost*” (John 6:12). Those who receive God’s gifts gratefully, should make good use of them. Jesus Christ wasn’t wasteful, and those who wear his name should be like Him!

Subtle Evidence Matthew, Mark, and John each mention that the multitude of 5,000 sat down on the grass to eat. Mark refers to the grass as “*green,*” while John specifies there was “*much grass*” in the place. A variety of reference works state that the only time of year when “*much green grass*” could have been found in that area and climate was the spring—which is precisely when John reveals that these events took place, “*Now the Passover, the feast of the Jews, was near*” (John 6:4). The Passover was always observed in the spring. Subtle details such as these show the harmony and veracity of the Bible story.

Church Responsibility Versus Individual Responsibility Some see the two miracles as authorization for the church to relieve the world’s hungry. Passages such as 1 Corinthians 16:1-2, Acts 11:27-30, Acts 6:1-6, and others do show the local church as having responsibility toward needy saints. While the work of the church is not under consideration in the narratives of the feedings, the example of Christ is a splendid one for the Christian. As Jesus saw a need, felt compassion, and used his resources to fill it,

the individual Christian should faithfully follow in his footsteps (1 Peter 2:21; Galatians 6:10; James 1:27).

Conclusion. Mark informs his readers that when Jesus disembarked from the boat near Bethsaida and saw the multitude waiting for Him on the shore, He felt compassion for them because *“they were like sheep without a shepherd”* (Mark 6:34). Things haven’t changed; souls desperately need the Good Shepherd today. By laying down His life for the sheep (John 10:11), He provided the means by which their souls may be *fed today* with the *“bread of life”* (John 6:35, 44-45), and *saved in eternity* when He comes again (John 6:40).