

John's Gospel - the Feeding of the Five Thousand

by John Vissers

Jesus feeds the 5,000 with five small barley loaves and two small fish, demonstrating his control and sovereignty, and the need for faith and trust in him.

Duration: 40:06

Scripture: Matthew 6:33, John 5:1 - 6:15

Topics: "Gospel Of John"

Description

In this sermon, the preacher discusses the miracle of Jesus feeding the 5,000 with just five barley loaves and two small fish. He emphasizes that Jesus often uses the least likely people and resources to accomplish his purposes. The preacher highlights the response of Philip, who initially doubts that the need can be met, and encourages listeners to see situations through the eyes of Jesus rather than their own limited perspective. The sermon concludes by challenging listeners to trust in Jesus and his ability to meet their needs, even in seemingly impossible circumstances.

Transcript

Tonight we come back to John's Gospel, and our passage is the sixth chapter tonight of John's Gospel, reading verses 1 to 15. A very familiar passage, I am sure, to many of you, the feeding of the 5,000. Jesus feeds the 5,000.

So let us hear God's word together this evening. Sometime after this, Jesus crossed to the far shore of the Sea of Galilee, that is, the Sea of Tiberias. And a great crowd of people followed him because they saw the miraculous signs he had performed on the sick.

Then Jesus went up on the hillside and sat down with his disciples. The Jewish Passover feast was near. When Jesus looked up and saw a great crowd coming toward him, he said to Philip, Where shall we buy bread for these people to eat? He asked this only to test him, for he already had in mind what he was going to do.

Philip answered him, Eight months' wages would not buy enough bread for each one to have a bite. Another of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, spoke up. He was a boy with five small barley loaves and two small fish, but how far will they go among so many? Jesus said, Have the people sit down.

There was plenty of grass in that place, and the men sat down, about 5,000 of them. Jesus then took the loaves, gave thanks, and distributed to those who were seated as much as they wanted. He did the same with the fish.

When they had all had enough to eat, he said to his disciples, Gather the pieces that are left over. Let nothing be wasted. So they gathered them and filled twelve baskets with the pieces of the five barley loaves left over by those who had eaten.

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 into the hills by himself. Amen, and may God bless to us this reading this evening from his word, and as we read these words, may he give us, indeed, fresh ears and fresh insight as we consider these words together.

Let's bow in prayer. Father, we thank you tonight for your word. We thank you for the gospel.

We thank you for our Lord Jesus Christ, and we pray now that you would speak to us. May your word be our rule, may your Holy Spirit be our teacher, and may your greater glory be our supreme concern through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Our passage this evening is an account of one of the most well-known miracles of Jesus Christ. I suspect it's a miracle that we've all heard about, that we've all read about, that we were taught, many of us as children in Sunday school. It's one of those stories, one of those miracles that everyone seems to know about in the New Testament.

It's the only miracle performed by Jesus which is recorded, interestingly enough, in all four Gospels. It's recorded for us here in John chapter 6, but it's also recorded in Mark chapter 6, in Luke chapter 9, and in Matthew chapter 14. And one of the interesting things is that it indicates just how carefully the gospel writers were in writing down the events, and you'll find the parallels here are remarkable.

And the fact that all four Gospels record this miracle, and that they do so in such great detail, and with so much in common, again points to the authenticity and to the authority, to the inspiration of Holy Scripture. John, the gospel writer, describes this miracle in great detail. He tells us exactly where it took place.

He tells us approximately when it took place. He tells us who was involved in the miracle. He describes it as much as is possible, at least in human language.

He describes how it happened, how it came to be that Jesus could possibly feed these 5,000. And he describes the effect of the miracle on the people who saw it, and indeed John goes into some detail in helping us understand Jesus' own mind as he saw the crowd coming toward him and as he performed this miracle. Now the passage begins by saying that the events took place sometime after this.

That's the opening line of the sixth chapter. And these words, of course, refer back to the fifth chapter of John's gospel. You'll remember how that chapter opens with the healing of the invalid by the pool and the sheep gate in Jerusalem.

You'll remember how Jesus healed that man and how Jesus soon found himself in conflict with the religious leaders because the healing had taken place on the Sabbath. And the rest of chapter 5 is Jesus' dialogue, Jesus' conversation, which was very intense at points, with the religious leaders as they pressed

him, as they accused him, and as he came back at them indicating the nature of his relationship with God the Father. And we spend some time unfolding in detail Jesus teaching there, how Jesus identified his relationship, his fellowship, his intimacy with God the Father.

And so now this event, the feeding of the 5,000, takes place sometime after this. And that phrase in the Gospel of John indicates that it was probably a good deal of time. In fact, some suggest it might have been as much as a year later.

Now the other clue that we have to the timing of this miracle is found in verse 4. Because verse 4 says that the Jewish Passover was near. And it may well be in comparison to the first and second chapter of John's gospel, where the Passover was also near, that we're now talking about another Passover about a year later. But it's an important observation by John in the context of the sixth chapter.

Because you realize of course that the Passover feast celebrated the liberation of the people of Israel from Egypt. But it also marked the beginning of their sojourn in the desert. It began their wandering of some 40 years in the desert before they were finally allowed to enter the promised land.

And during that time they experienced the provision of God. They experienced God leading them and God feeding them day by day. They were absolutely dependent upon the Lord for their daily food.

You'll remember how the Lord fed them with manna from heaven. And it seems to me that John the gospel writer, particularly in terms of what happens later in the sixth chapter, is wanting us to understand that Jesus is the one who provides the bread of life. That he is the one who has come to feed his people.

Just as Moses in leading the people and just as God fed the people as they were wandering in the desert, so now Jesus feeds the people who come to him with bread and fish. And later in this chapter as we'll see in a few weeks, Jesus says, I am the bread of life. He who comes to me will never go hungry and he who drinks of me will never thirst again.

Now the miracle takes place in Galilee. Jesus is now back in Galilee and Jesus has been preaching, the text says, and teaching as we look over the gospels. He's been healing throughout Galilee.

And in order to get away from the crowds, it says Jesus crossed over the sea to the west side of the Sea of Galilee from the west side over to the east side. He goes to the other side of the lake, to the east side of the lake, to a region in fact which is known today as the Golan Heights. And he goes there to a hillside and he sits down with his disciples.

We're not exactly sure precisely where this was. One of the other gospels says it was near Bethsaida. And you've got to get the picture here.

Jesus goes across the lake to the east side to what's now known as the Golan Heights and the crowd makes its way around the top of the lake. It would have taken them longer but nevertheless soon it would seem that they're there. They're there to follow Jesus.

They're there following him on foot around the north end of the lake. They had seen him heal the sick. They wanted to see more miracles.

They wanted to be near him. They wanted to press in upon him. And so what we have here is a setting of the stage for the events that then follow.

Well with that stage set before us let's look at the story as it unfolds and the miracle as it's described by John the Gospel writer in these verses. Now the first major part or the first major movement of the story really is the dialogue between Jesus and his disciples in verses 5 to 9. And I want you to notice the enormous challenge and the overwhelming need which characterizes this story. You've got to get the idea here.

The crowd is coming toward Jesus. The crowd is coming toward his disciples. The text says that there are at least 5,000.

Probably more because John seems to take great pains to say there were 5,000 men and in fact if you look at each of the other Gospel accounts they also describe it in that way. And who knows how many there really were. It could have been as many as 10 or 15,000 people when you include the women and the children in the count.

And when you think about it, that in and of itself is remarkable. Because here you have Jesus being followed by a crowd of 5, 10, 15,000 people. It indicates his popularity.

It indicates something of the impact that he was having in the region of Galilee. How people would come out to hear him teach, hear him preach, wanting to be healed, wanting him to perform miracles. So there's a great number.

And there they are out in the hills west of, east of the Sea of Galilee. And they had a major problem because they soon realized that these people were going to have to find food in some way. They were going to have to find something to eat to feed this crowd.

And if the crowd were not able to be fed they would have a real problem on their hands. Now notice that Jesus speaks first in this dialogue and he says to Philip, where shall we buy food for these people to eat? But then notice what John the Gospel writer adds, he asked this only to test him for he already had in mind what he was going to do. Now I want to suggest to you that this is very consistent with the portrayal of Jesus in the Gospel of John by the Gospel writer John.

Because Jesus in the Gospel of John is portrayed without a doubt as the Son of God. He is the Word made flesh. He is the Word of God by whom and for whom and through whom all things were created.

He is in control. He is the sovereign one. He knows the problem.

He knows the challenge. He understands the need which confronts him. Jesus knew what he was going to do.

And I want to suggest to you this evening that this is an important point to underline today as we think about our own lives, as we think about the life of the church, as we think about the reality of our world, that Jesus knows what he is going to do. We sometimes throw our hands up in despair when we face overwhelming odds, when we face enormous challenges which confront us, when we face needs that we think cannot be met in any way whatsoever. But we need to be reminded that Jesus is in control, that he is the Lord of our world, that he is the Lord of our lives, that he still sees the crowds coming at him, that he still surveys the needs of our world and the world in which we live, that he still surveys the needs of our personal lives.

Jesus knows what he wants to do in our time and in our generation. He knows what he wants to do in the tangled web of our personal lives. And as we think about our own lives, as we think about the work that we do day by day, as we think about our families, as we think about our relationships, as we think about our church, as we think about the needs of this city, as we think about the needs of our world, one of the things we need to understand, one of the things we need to remember is that Jesus knows what he wants to do in our midst.

That Jesus is always one step ahead of us and our task is to get in step with the will of God rather than throwing our hands up in despair or even worse, trying to meet the needs on our own. But even more, the point needs to be noticed that Jesus wanted, Jesus forced his disciples to face the need which was before them. He wouldn't let them get out from underneath that need.

He forced Philip and Andrew and the others to face the need which was before them. And Jesus, it seems to me, forces his people, even today, to face the same overwhelming needs which we find around ourselves. We live in a world today of incredible need, where people have incredible needs, where there are incredible challenges.

Our world is filled with hungry and hurting people, needy people. Our cities are teeming with the lost. People without God and without hope in the world.

As I was reading and studying this past week, I came across this quote by the great reformed theologian and missiologist, missionary theologian J. H. Bavinck, who described the need in this way a few years ago and how much more is it true today. He says, People wish to remain quiet in the peaceful little church under the high Gothic arches. They would brood about God and be preoccupied with the needs of their own souls.

They do not want to be shocked by the bewildering idea that there are still many hundreds of millions of people who are in need and who have never heard the gospel, who have never heard the name of Christ. Bavinck wrote these words a few years ago. And if the need is greater today, so often sadly is the preoccupation of Christians and of the church with themselves and with itself.

The need has grown and Jesus knows what he wants to do in our midst. One of the other gospels reminds us in the telling of this story that Jesus had compassion on the crowds. He knew what he wanted to do and he will not let us get out from under the needs which confront us as his disciples.

And then notice Philip's response in verse 7. Philip says, Eight months' wages would not buy enough food for each one to have a bite. Now, Philip comes across a number of times in John's gospel as the one who tries to put reality before our Lord. He's the one who tries to kind of come clean and tries to explain things as they really are.

And Philip, you can imagine, is seeing what's going on. There's all these people and he knows there's no place to buy food. There's no sign of food.

There's, if we might put it this way, no sign of a pizza hut on the beach of Galilee. No sign of a Wendy's in Capernaum. No place to buy food.

And even worse, even if there were some place to buy food, there's no money. Because even if they had about eight months' wages, you figure out how much that is in your own terms. There was no way that they could feed everybody.

So Philip's response is really one of despair. One commentator describes his attitude this way. We measure the need, we quantify our inadequate resources, and we resign in hopelessness.

Isn't that a marvelous description of how sometimes Christians respond to needs and to situations which confront them? We measure the need, we quantify our inadequate resources, and then we resign in hopelessness. We throw our hands up. It is beyond us.

No way can this need be met. The situation is utterly hopeless. Nothing can be done.

Philip, you see, is immobilized by the overwhelming task. And I want to suggest to you that we all know people like Philip. In fact, some of us, too many of us, are like Philip.

Because we just can't see the situation through the eyes of Jesus. We see the situation through our own eyes when we're confronted with these enormous challenges and these enormous needs, and we're paralyzed. We're immobilized with fear and paralyzed by doubt.

Is there some situation in your life tonight where you feel that way? Where you think about what's going on in your life, and you realize there's this enormous challenge, you realize there's this enormous need, and you have no idea how you're going to meet that need. You have no idea how you're going to ever overcome that challenge. You have no idea how you can possibly navigate your way through this situation.

And what often happens in situations like that is, of course, you become immobilized. You become paralyzed. You measure the need.

You quantify your own resources and recognize they are inadequate. And you resign in hopelessness. So if Jesus was wanting to test his disciples, at this point, Philip, it would appear, failed to pass the test.

But then notice Andrew steps forward. And he produces a boy with five small barley loaves and two small fish. This was no doubt supposed to be his lunch.

One can't imagine why else he would be carrying five barley loaves and two fish. Barley bread was the cheapest of all of the breads in the first century. It was looked down upon.

It was the food of the poor. It's what poor people ate. And Andrew is a little more helpful than Philip.

He doesn't entirely know what's going to happen. He doesn't entirely have faith that they're going to be able to meet the situation and meet the need. But nevertheless, he pushes this boy forward.

He brings this boy to Jesus. And he says, Here's something. We can at least begin to meet the need.

It's a small but a genuine response of faith struggling against the backdrop of skepticism in the midst of the overwhelming need. And again, I suggest to you that this attitude also may characterize many of us. We want to believe that Jesus can meet the need.

We want to be as helpful as we can. We want to step forward. But we wonder, is it really going to be enough? Is it really going to help? Will it really work? How far can these five barley loaves and two small fish really go? Well, there you have the situation.

Jesus sees the crowd coming towards him. He knows they have to be fed. He raises an issue.

Philip responds. Philip doesn't have any faith. Andrew brings this little boy forward.

And Jesus then begins to feed the 5,000. And that brings us then quickly to the second major movement in the story, which is the miracle itself in verses 10-13. Notice that Jesus instructs the people to sit down.

They were presumably in a big open area, in a big field. There was plenty of grass, so they all sat down, it says. And Jesus took the loaves, he gave thanks, and he distributed to those who were seated as much as they wanted.

And the text says, when they had all had enough to eat, they gathered up what was left. Nothing was to be wasted. After everyone had been satisfied, there was more left over at the end than there was at the beginning.

Now, what you've got here is something which is very simple, very straightforward. The needs of these people were simply met. Now, what are we to make of this miracle? It's a very interesting miracle, because like the miracle in John chapter 2, where Jesus changes the water into wine at the wedding feast in Cana of Galilee, it just sort of happens.

There's nothing sensational about this. Jesus doesn't perform this great, magical kind of introduction to the feeding of the 5,000. There's no sensational hoopla here.

Jesus simply goes about providing the needs of the people who were there. He meets the needs of those who needed to be fed. And I think there's a clue here as to how Jesus often operates even in our world today.

Now, there's been some interesting and some fanciful interpretations of this miracle. William Barclay, the great Scottish commentator who denied most of the miracles of the New Testament, gives it this interpretation, this spin. He suggests that most of the people, like this little boy, had brought along their own lunch.

After all, they knew they were going out for a long walk. They were heading up around the north end of the shore of the Sea of Galilee. And so probably everyone had their own lunch.

And when the crowd saw the little boy willing to share his lunch with those who had none, they thought, that's a pretty good example. So they all then began to share what they had. And the real miracle, Barclay says, is that selfish men and women sat down and broke bread together, sharing what they had.

Well, that might be a nice interpretation. It might be nice for selfish men and women to sit down and to break bread together and share what they have. But I guess I'm just a simple Christian believer.

Because it seems to me, when you look at John chapter 6 and you look at the parallels and the synoptic Gospels and Matthew, Mark, and Luke, the point that's being made is that Jesus miraculously transformed this little bit into a lot. And this alone accounts for the response of the crowd in verses 14 to 15. It seems to me that the response of the crowd indicates that they realize that something significant here has happened.

This is not simply a natural event, this is a supernatural event. That Jesus has miraculously transformed a little boy's lunch into a food bank for over 5,000, 10,000, 15,000 people. Now the lessons of the miracle itself, it seems to me, are quite clear.

First of all, Jesus uses the resources of this little boy. And one of the wonderful things, of course, about our Lord is that throughout the Gospel, Jesus does the unexpected. He lifts up the weak.

In fact, throughout the whole Bible, God uses often the least likely people to perform his work and to accomplish his purposes. We're reminded of David in 1 Samuel 17 going up against Goliath. We're reminded of young Samuel himself in the temple being called by God.

What looks like weakness to the world, what looks like something small in the eyes of the world, is used by the Lord for accomplishing his purpose. That's what the kingdom of God is all about. The values of the kingdom turn everything upside down.

He uses the resources that we might least expect. What about in our own lives? What about in our church? What about in our world? What are the resources that Jesus might use, those resources that we might least expect him to use? Notice then that Jesus gave thanks. He knew he was dependent upon God as Father, that he acted in the power of the Spirit, that all that he did and all that he had was independence upon God.

Notice that he insisted that nothing should be wasted. The provisions of God are not to be squandered. There is a lesson in stewardship here, which we don't have time to develop, but an important lesson for Christians in our world and the kind of consumer culture in which we live.

Are we not responsible for what the Lord provides for us? Are we not responsible for what the Lord provides for us to live day by day, to use those things responsibly, rather than squandering the Lord's provision while others go hungry? Notice then that Jesus provided more than was necessary. When Jesus is at work, he goes beyond filling a basic need. There was more left over at the end than there was at the beginning.

The provision of Jesus is glorious. And isn't that often how it is in our own lives? When we try to do something in our own strength, when we try to use our own resources, we may in fact find that we're not up to the task ourselves, or we may find that we don't have the resources to accomplish, to fill the need and to accomplish the work that is before us. But when Jesus works, when Jesus moves in, when we allow the Lord to intervene, there is more than enough.

And then finally, notice that the episode concludes with a description of how this miracle affects the crowd in verses 14 and 15. The people realize that this is not merely a pure, natural event, that this is a miracle, that something supernatural has taken place, that it is an act of God. And they respond by saying, this Jesus must be the prophet who was to come into the world.

Now this is a reference to Moses, who we've already mentioned this evening, who led the people of Israel out of Egypt, who led them into the desert where they wandered for 40 years, and under his leadership they had been fed. And so it was natural for the people to wonder, is this the prophet? Has the prophet returned into our midst? But notice the response of Jesus. He knew that they were going to come and make him king by force, so he withdrew.

The time had not yet come. The time of the kingdom was not yet to be fulfilled. This was not the way of the kingdom.

This was not the way Jesus was to be made king. Jesus knew, but the people still did not understand. And I want to suggest to you that the response of the crowd illustrates what I would describe as the slippery

slope or the dangerous path of faith in Jesus.

On the one hand, these people believed in Jesus. They wanted to acclaim him as king. They saw the miraculous signs.

They were impressed with what Jesus had done. They wanted to respond to Jesus. They wanted to come to him and take hold of him and make him king.

What's wrong with that? I mean, why would Jesus back away from that? The problem is that they want Jesus. They want to respond to Jesus simply because he met their need. He gave them what they wanted.

He filled their stomachs and they wanted to continue to use him for that purpose. They wanted to make him king so that in fact he would lead them out from under Roman oppression and domination. They wanted Jesus to continue to fill their needs.

But Jesus knew, you see, that they had not yet come to terms with who he was. That they hadn't really understood the teaching of the coming of the kingdom. That they hadn't really understood his call to discipleship.

That they weren't prepared for what was yet to come, the confrontation in Jerusalem. And the fact that he was going to go to a cross and that he was going to be crucified. And that the kingdom was going to come through his death.

They wanted a Messiah who would meet their needs on their own terms in the timing that they wanted. But Jesus would have none of it. And he withdrew, it says, into the hills.

And I want to suggest to you that here, at this point, is the crucial teaching of this passage. Because many of us are quite willing to believe in Jesus. We want to believe in Jesus.

We will even acclaim Jesus as king as long as Jesus meets our needs. As long as Jesus dances to our tune. As long as Jesus conforms to our idea of what we think a Messiah, a Savior, a Lord should be.

As long as Jesus makes me feel good about myself. And that, my friends, is precisely what Jesus will never allow. He will never allow himself to be used in this way.

If he is not Lord of all, if he is not acknowledged as the sovereign Lord, as Savior, in terms of his kingdom, in terms of his call to discipleship, in terms of his going to the cross, in terms of his resurrection, if he is not Lord of all in this way, then he is not Lord at all. And my friends, I say this with a heavy heart tonight. There are many, many in the evangelical church today who have so domesticated Jesus and so recreated him in our own image, so used him to meet our own needs.

But the tragedy is that like he did so many years ago, I suggest that Jesus wants to withdraw into the hills by himself. You see, the real point of this passage is not whether Jesus can perform miracles. It's a miracle story.

We believe that Jesus can perform miracles. But that's not the real point of the story. The real point of the story is not whether Jesus can meet our needs.

Although he does meet a need here. There's no doubt about that. But you can believe those things.

You can believe that Jesus performs miracles, and you can believe that Jesus meets needs without really belonging to him. And that's how this passage concludes. You can want to acclaim him as king because he's done something for you, but not fully understand his claim upon your life.

You see, saving faith is a deep experience of repentance as you turn away from your self-absorbed values and the structures of values that you've established and the needs that you think you have. It's turning from that and trusting in Christ alone. It is casting yourself on him alone.

It is a deep sense of obedience to his will and way and word, no matter what the cost. Whether or not he turns water into wine, whether or not he can feed 5,000 or 10,000 with 5 loaves and 2 fishes. It is faith in Jesus Christ and in Jesus alone.

You see, Jesus doesn't want us to believe in him because he performs miracles. He invites us to trust in him because he is the Son of God, and he deserves our trust. And so you see, the real question tonight is not whether Jesus can perform a miracle in your life.

He can. It's not whether Jesus can meet your needs. He can.

It's whether you will acknowledge him as the crucified and risen one, the eternal Son of God, who is alone worthy of all honor and glory and praise. May it not be that Jesus withdraws from us because we don't trust in him as Savior and Lord. Let's pray.

Father, we believe that through your word you have been speaking to us, and we acknowledge that sometimes we are so caught up in our own lives that we don't really understand, or we don't want to understand, your claim, the claim of our Lord Jesus Christ upon us. And so we just are before you this evening in this quiet moment. We pray that you would look into our hearts and into our lives and purify them and help us to trust in you as we've never trusted before, not because of what you can do for us, but because you are Sovereign Lord, Creator God, Savior, because you alone deserve our worship, our praise, and our faith.

Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

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