

“Jesus’ Miraculous Provision”

John 6:1-15

July 17, 2016

INTRODUCTION:

In our series on the miracles of Jesus, we come today to the only miracle that appears in all four Gospels. In the feeding of the five thousand, we see that Jesus is the ultimate host, exercising his gift of hospitality for the benefit of poor, hungry sinners like us. He is clearly described in this miracle as the host of this meal, feeding 5000 men, each of whom could have represented another 2-3 people. So this was an immense crowd, possibly numbering up to 20,000 people. Jesus directs them to sit down on the grass, and then, serving in the role of host, offers a prayer of thanksgiving and serves the people out of his abundant and miraculous provision. All eat their fill.

The compassion and generosity of Jesus is evident in this miracle, seen in the fact that Jesus was on vacation during this time. He and his disciples had just concluded an intensive time of ministry, and Jesus wants to take them on a retreat to recover from their heavy ministry schedule. Since they had access to boats due to the fact that several of the disciples were fishermen, they take to the boats to cross the Sea of Galilee to a remote, mountainous area. Mark’s account of this miracle tells us that while Jesus and his disciples were on their way to this retreat site, a large crowd anticipated where they were going to land and ran there ahead of them. Jesus then taught them from the Scriptures until they were hungry. That’s where John’s account picks up. Jesus doesn’t respond to this interruption of his vacation in a resentful way. Rather, he takes upon himself the burden of providing for this hungry crowd.

Jesus is the great Provider, and this miracle invites us to look to him in that role. He provides not only our material need in the form of daily food, but also provides our spiritual sustenance. As he is going to say later in this chapter, Jesus himself is the bread of life. He not only *provides* bread, he *is* bread. Our need is to trust him to provide for us. I read a story years ago about a woman who taught a preschool Sunday School class with her husband. One of the preschoolers in her class was her own son, Mark. The lesson one Sunday was on Psalm 56:3, which they had the children memorize. “When I am afraid, I will trust in you.” One stormy night during the week after they taught that verse, the electricity went off in their house. Mark immediately announced to his parents that he wasn’t afraid. Expecting him to quote the Bible verse he had learned in Sunday School, his mother proudly prompted him, “And tell us why you aren’t afraid.” Mark answered quickly, “Cause I’ve got my flashlight.” It’s easier to trust God when you’ve got a flashlight. This miracle invites us to trust him even when we don’t. Let’s explore this more fully as we look at the two hungry groups and the generous provision of Jesus.

I. Two Hungry Groups

If we are going to feel the impact of this story, we're going to have to use our imagination just a little. We're going to have to imagine what it would be like to experience real hunger. Though all of us have been hungry, our hunger as middle class Americans is very different from the experience of hunger of the vast majority of people in Jesus' day. How much time do you spend worrying about where your next meal is going to come from? It is much more common for us to worry about trying not to eat so much that we put our health and our looks at risk. But if you had lived in Jesus' day, your one overriding concern would be about providing food for yourself and your family. Since there was little ability to transport large amounts of food over long distances, a drought in one region would have a much greater impact on that region than is the case with us. Our modern, twenty-first century concerns such as providing your children with a good education, saving enough money for retirement, paying for car repairs, or replacing your old HVAC system, would never enter the minds of those living in Jesus' day. Keeping enough food on the table so as not to starve to death would be your daily, overriding concern.

John reports that this large crowd followed Jesus into the wilderness, where no food can be found. Jesus taught them there, giving them a type of food, spiritual food. But Jesus created our bodies to need physical food as well. Some undoubtedly had brought food, but most had not planned on staying so long in the wilderness, and that old familiar and always unwelcome feeling of hunger had set in. The young and strong could withstand the challenges of hunger, but the older and weaker would have a more difficult time walking back home, and then waiting even longer while food was prepared. It was in that situation of hunger that Jesus performed this miracle, not just giving people enough food to sustain them until they could get more, but enough so that everyone ate their fill.

The crowd of 5000 men is not the only hungry group in this story. Jesus deliberately seeks to create a different kind of hunger in his disciples when he asks Philip, **“Where are we to buy bread, so that these people may eat?”** (v. 5). It's an interesting question, since Philip knew that they had no money. It would be something like your spouse asking you, “Where should we go to buy a new car?” when your old car finally breaks beyond repair but your bank account has less than \$100 in it. Philip doesn't answer Jesus' question. Jesus had asked a “where” question, but Philip focuses on the “how” of it. He makes a quick calculation and says, **“Two hundred denarii would not buy enough bread for each of them to get a little”** (v. 7). Since a denarius was equal to a day's wages, two hundred denarii would be equal to something like \$30,000 in our day. Jesus and his disciples were not wealthy men, and they would not have had such a sum among them.

What is Jesus doing here? Why does he ask that question of Philip? Jesus is trying to create a different kind of hunger in his disciples. Jesus wants to provide abundant food for the disciples as well, but he must first create hunger. As Jesus is going to explain later in this chapter, he not only provides bread—he is bread. He wants to create in his disciples and in us a hunger for him. His most common way of doing so is to present us with a need that is far beyond our ability to meet and then to invite us to look to him for that.

This gives us a completely different attitude toward hunger. When is hunger a good thing? Proverbs 27:7 says, **“One who is full loathes honey, but to one who is hungry everything bitter is sweet.”** Hunger increases the joy when the hunger is satisfied. Sometimes when I ask the blessing before a meal I will thank God for hunger which sweetens the food he has provided and increases the joy of the eating experience. The same is true in the spiritual realm. When you encounter a need in your life that is beyond your ability, that is a type of spiritual hunger. And when Jesus, the bread of life, meets that need, it is a joyful experience. You have a loved one who doesn’t know the Lord, and that produces a great hunger in your soul for that loved one to know Jesus. And then it happens, bringing great joy to the hungry soul who has been praying for the conversion of that loved one for perhaps many decades.

What hunger is there in your life right now? Maybe you’re just weary and you hunger for rest. Or maybe there’s a chronic shortage of money to pay your regular bills or some health challenge. Maybe you feel yourself to be in a wilderness like these people were in our passage, with no prospects on the horizon for any satisfaction of your need. Let your hunger take you to Jesus. He gives hunger not because he likes to see us suffer, but in order that we might experience the joy of coming to him for satisfaction. He doesn’t always satisfy the hunger immediately, but he always satisfies it eventually. And he satisfies it abundantly, which brings us to our next point.

II. One Generous Provider

The text emphasizes in a number of ways the generosity of Jesus’ provision. We see it in the amount of the leftovers—twelve baskets full of them. In American culture, it is seen as polite to eat all the food on your plate. In many cultures, however, the polite thing to do is to leave at least one small piece of food on your plate. That shows your host that he has generously provided more than enough food for you, so much that you couldn’t eat it all. The leftovers are mentioned for precisely this reason. Everyone ate to the point that they couldn’t eat anymore.

Something else I notice about Jesus’ generous provision is that he chooses to bring it through others rather than directly. Jesus could have created this

food completely out of nothing, but instead brought it forth out of the young boy's provision of five loaves and two fish. When we picture a loaf of bread, we think of this large hunk of bread that by itself would feed several people. This barley loaf was more the size of a biscuit than a large loaf of bread. And the fish were not large salmon or tuna steaks, but probably small strips of pickled or dried fish. This young boy was probably with the disciples, perhaps related to one of them. It is unlikely that Andrew searched the bags of all fifteen or twenty thousand people who were there. I think his point is in support of Philip's statement. Philip had calculated how much money it would take just to give everyone a taste of food, and Andrew follows up on that by saying in effect, "And we don't have two-hundred denarii. Among our whole group, we only have these five loaves and two fish." John tells us that the loaves were barley loaves, not wheat loaves. Barley was the common food of the poor. So the point here is the smallness of their means in light of the vastness of the need.

There is great encouragement here. Like the disciples, we face a world with needs far greater than we can possibly meet. Yet Jesus chooses to use us in all our smallness and inadequacies. You don't have to be eloquent or good looking or rich for Jesus to use you. As a matter of fact, he often chooses to bypass that group in order to use the barley loaf crowd, so that God gets the glory and no one else. Our call is to offer our barley loaves to Jesus, after which we watch him multiply those mediocre provisions to bring much good to many.

There is more encouragement here. After Jesus asked Philip where they could get enough bread for these people to eat, we read, "**He said this to test him, for he himself knew what he would do**" (v. 6). At the same time Philip was in a near panic at the enormity of the need and the paucity of their resources, Jesus was completely calm. He knew exactly what he was going to do. He knew that there was a young boy who had brought his lunch this day. He knew exactly how many people were there, and he knew that he had both the ability and the will to multiply this food thousands of times over, so that everyone would be filled. There was only calm confidence in the heart of Jesus.

Think about an area in your life in which you are experiencing hunger. Now receive what we learn of Jesus here, that he already knows what he is going to do. The needs may feel great to you and the obstacles insurmountable. There is no panic or anxiety in Jesus, because he already knows how and when he is going to satisfy that need. Years ago, I remember going through one of those human mazes made out of giant hedgerows. When you're in the maze, you can only see hedges that are seven or eight feet tall. Your perspective is limited. But if you could be in radio contact with someone who was mounted on a platform twenty feet above the maze, a person who could see the way out and who could see your precise position, it would be a simple thing to make your way through the hedge. Jesus has such a perspective, and he knows exactly what he is going to do.

There is still more going on here with the generous provision of Jesus for his people, something we can see in the way the story ends. Everyone understands that a great miracle has occurred this day, and as a result, this crowd concludes that Jesus is the Messiah. They also get very enthusiastic about this fact and want to make Jesus king. So they draw the right conclusion about Jesus' identity and want to take action that is consistent with this conclusion. Why then does Jesus not cooperate with their plan to make him king? We read that he fled all by himself even deeper into this remote region. He was strongly opposed to their plan. Why?

Jesus was anticipating another, even more significant need they had than physical bread. They needed more than a king who could feed them regularly; they needed someone who could take care of their deeper problem due to their sin against God. They needed a Savior as well as a King. It is not without significance that John mentions that this occurred near Passover. John notes all three Passovers during the ministry of Jesus. This is the only one that finds him away from Jerusalem. During Passover, Jerusalem was packed with Jews who came to be present when the Passover lamb was sacrificed. Now they are packed around the true Passover Lamb, the one who takes away the sin of the world. Jesus runs from their attempts to make him king because he knows of their deeper need for forgiveness.

CONCLUSION:

Gladys Aylward was a missionary to China more than seventy years ago. Her story has been told in a movie called *The Inn of the Sixth Happiness*, starring Ingrid Bergman as Gladys Aylward. The conclusion of the movie is about a time when she led a group of children as they were fleeing from the invading Japanese army. With only one assistant, she led more than a hundred orphans over the mountains toward Free China. In their book *The Hidden Price of Greatness*, Ray Besson and Ranelda Mack Hunsicker tell what happened:

During Gladys's harrowing journey out of war-torn Yangcheng ... she grappled with despair as never before. After passing a sleepless night, she faced the morning with no hope of reaching safety. A 13-year-old girl in the group reminded her of their much-loved story of Moses and the Israelites crossing the Red Sea. 'But I am not Moses,' Gladys cried in desperation. 'Of course you aren't,' the girl said, 'but Jehovah is still God!'"

Jesus is still God, and the Jesus who multiplied the bread and fish in order to provide for the hunger of the crowd of the 5000 men is the same God we call upon. He knows your need, he knows what he is going to do about it, and he provides abundantly. Receive his provision for you today. Like the crowd, be passive, sit down and receive from Jesus.