

Feeding the Five Thousand

Matt 14:14-21

“On hearing of the death of [John the Baptist], Jesus thought it better to retire from the kingdom of Antipas, until it was clear whether the designs of Antipas were directed against him also. He therefore retired across the lake to Bethsaida-Julias, in the dominion of Philip” (Dummelow 676).

“This story, which is one of the few incidents to be reported by all 4 of the gospel writers, is filled with symbolic elements arising from the Eucharistic practices of the early church. The words of blessing and distribution follow quite precisely the traditional words of ritual of the Lord’s Supper. It is not to suggest that there is nothing historical about the event; it is rather to suggest that what is historical is so overlaid with what is symbolic that the two can no longer be differentiated sharply” (*ICB* 627).

The feeding of the five thousand is the only miracle found in all four Gospels (Matt. 14:13-21; Mark 6:32-44; Luke 9:10-17; John 6:1-14).

14 And Jesus went forth, and saw a great multitude, and was moved with compassion toward them, and he healed their sick.

“Mark (6:34) says he was moved with compassion because they were as sheep having no shepherd. A shepherd is one who takes care of a flock. It was his duty to feed it, to defend it from wolves and other wild beasts; to take care of the young and feeble; to lead it by green pastures and still waters, Ps 23. When Christ says the people were as sheep without a shepherd, he means that they had no *teachers* and *guides* who cared for them, and took pains to instruct them. The scribes and Pharisees were haughty and proud and cared little for the common people; and when they did attempt to teach them, they led them astray. They therefore came in great multitudes to him who preached the gospel to the poor, and who was thus the good Shepherd, John 10:14” (Barnes 68).

15 And when it was evening, his disciples came to him, saying, it is a desert place, and the time is now past; send the multitude away, that they may go into the villages, and buy themselves victuals.

“This ‘desert place’ is more definitely described by Luke (ix.10) as ‘belonging to the city called Bethsaida.’ This town lay on its north-eastern side, near where the Jordan empties itself into it; in Gaulonitis, out of the dominions of Herod Antipas, and within the dominions of Philip the Tetrarch, who raised it from a village to a city, and called it Julias, in honour of Julia, the daughter of Augustus” (Jamieson 3.159).

“A desert place means a place little cultivated, where there were few or no inhabitants. On the east of the sea of Galilee there was a large tract of country of this description—rough, uncultivated and chiefly used to pasture flocks” (Barnes 68).

“The time is now past. That is, the day is passing away; it is near night; and it is proper to make some provision for the temporal wants of so many” (Barnes 68).

16 But Jesus said unto them, they need not depart; give ye them to eat.

“Give ye: disciples had said, ‘send them away to buy for themselves.’ Christ replies, *Give ye*” (Vincent 1.85).

17 And they say unto him, We have here but five loaves, and two fishes.

“John is more precise and full. ‘One of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter’s brother, saith unto Him, here is a lad here which hath five barley loaves and two small fishes: but what are they among so many?’” (Jamieson 3.160).

“These loaves were in the possession of a lad, or young man, who was with them, and were made of barley, John 6:9. It is possible that this lad was one in attendance on the apostles to carry their food; but it is most probably he was one who had provision to sell among the multitude. Barley was a cheap kind of food, scarcely one-third the value of wheat, and was much used by poor people” (Barnes 68).

One Bible scholar mentions that this lad may have come to hear Jesus and brought his lunch with him. His receptive, childlike thought planned ahead, hoping to hear such wonderful teaching from Jesus that maybe he wouldn’t make it home to dinner that night. With great expectancy of good, he is prepared to stay as long as Jesus speaks.

18 He said, Bring them hither to me.

19 And he commanded the multitude to sit down on the grass, and took the five loaves, and the two fishes, and looking up to heaven, he blessed, and brake, and gave the loaves to his disciples, and the disciples to the multitude.

“Jesus alone multiplies the loaves and fishes. He gives the orders, gives thanks, and breaks the loaves. e actions—looking up to heaven, thanking God, and breaking the loaves—are normal for any head of a Jewish household” (*EBC* 8.342).

In Mark 6:40 it says: “‘They sat down in ranks, by hundreds, and by fifties.’ Doubtless this was to show at a glance the number fed, and to enable all to witness in an orderly manner this glorious miracle” (Jamieson 3.160).

“The word to bless means, often, to give thanks; to pray that what we do may meet his approbation. In seeking a blessing on our food it means, to pray that it may be made nourishing to us; that we may have proper gratitude to God, the Giver, for providing for our wants; and that we may remember the Creator, while we partake the bounties of his providence. Our Saviour *always* sought a blessing on his food” (Barnes 69).

“The few brief phrases ‘he himself knew what he would do,’ ‘looking up to heaven,’ and ‘when he had given thanks’ (Jn. 6:11) bespeak his prayer and the source to which he looked for the fulfillment of their needs. He confidently drew on the infinite resources of God, and his knowledge of God’s beneficence abundantly multiplied the few loaves and fishes so that when the apostles had distributed them to the people all were filled, and twelve baskets of fragments remained” (Shotwell 271).

“The fact that in v. 19 we have the words *took, looked up, blessed, brake, gave*—words which we find again in the account of the institution of the Lord’s Supper in Lk. 22: 17-20 and I Cor. 11:23-25 as well as in the Emmaus story (Lk. 24:30)—would suggest that the incident had a sacramental, symbolical significance for the evangelist” (*Abingdon* 979).

“The **loaves** are obviously significant in the early church in connection with the Eucharist. But the **fish** were also important as a Christian symbol. e fact that the letters of the Greek word for “sh,” *ichthus*, were the initials of the full title of Jesus as worshipped in the church—*Iesous Christos eou Uios* (i.e. Jesus Christ God’s Son, Savior)—made this symbol especially appealing” (*ICB* 627).

20 And they did all eat, and were filled: and they took up of the fragments that remained twelve baskets full.

“This was an undoubted miracle. e quantity must have been greatly increased, to have supplied so many” (Barnes 69).

“The twelve baskets (*kophinos*, a sti wicker basket) of leftovers and the size of the crowd (which might have been fifteen or twenty thousand total, if there were five thousand ‘men,’ v. 21) also support the latter point. e ‘twelve basketfuls’ may be significant: that there were twelve tribes and twelve apostles— emphasized in 19:28—cannot be coincidence. Yet the precise significance is uncertain. e best suggestion may be that Messiah’s supply is so lavish that even the scraps of his provision are enough to supply the needs of Israel, represented by the Twelve” (*EBC* 8.342).

“*Kophinoi* were large baskets such as were frequently carried by Jews. Each of the apostles had one. e gathering up of the fragments for future use was a lesson in economy, a protest against waste” (Dummelow 676).

“Most modern interpreters call attention to the story in 2 Kings 4:42-44, where the prophet is said to have fed a hundred men with twenty loaves of barley. Not only were they all satisfied but a quantity of food was left over” (*Abingdon* 979).

21 And they that had eaten were about five thousand men, beside women and children.

“Probably the number might have been ten thousand” (Barnes 69).

“Moses had fed his people in the wilderness with manna; it was a rabbinical teaching that Israel’s Messiah would do the same. The five thousand, seeing this great miracle, were convinced that here was their Messianic King: ‘this is of a truth that prophet that should come into the world’” (Shotwell 271).

“The effect of the miracle on the multitudes was so great, (John 6:14, 15) that they believed him to be that Prophet which should come into the world; that is, the *Messiah*, the *King* that they had expected, and they were about to take him *by force* and make him a king. To avoid this, Jesus got away from them as privately as possible. He went into a solitary mountain alone” (Barnes 69)

