

The Lesson of the Loaves

Mark 6:30-44 ³⁰ Then the apostles gathered to Jesus and told Him all things, both what they had done and what they had taught. ³¹ And He said to them, "Come aside by yourselves to a deserted place and rest a while." For there were many coming and going, and they did not even have time to eat. ³² So they departed to a deserted place in the boat by themselves. ³³ But the multitudes saw them departing, and many knew Him and ran there on foot from all the cities. They arrived before them and came together to Him. ³⁴ And Jesus, when He came out, saw a great multitude and was moved with compassion for them, because they were like sheep not having a shepherd. So He began to teach them many things. ³⁵ When the day was now far spent, His disciples came to Him and said, "This is a deserted place, and already the hour is late. ³⁶ "Send them away, that they may go into the surrounding country and villages and buy themselves bread; for they have nothing to eat." ³⁷ But He answered and said to them, "You give them something to eat." And they said to Him, "Shall we go and buy two hundred denarii worth of bread and give them something to eat?" ³⁸ But He said to them, "How many loaves do you have? Go and see." And when they found out they said, "Five, and two fish." ³⁹ Then He commanded them to make them all sit down in groups on the green grass. ⁴⁰ So they sat down in ranks, in hundreds and in fifties. ⁴¹ And when He had taken the five loaves and the two fish, He looked up to heaven, blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to His disciples to set before them; and the two fish He divided among them all. ⁴² So they all ate and were filled. ⁴³ And they took up twelve baskets full of fragments and of the fish. ⁴⁴ Now those who had eaten the loaves were about five thousand men.

Crystal Cathedral was the name of a church that existed from 1955 to 2010. It was housed in a building that cost \$18 million, and was led by Robert Schuller. Schuller taught the false gospel of self-esteem, that all sin was merely a problem with self-esteem. He broadcast this heresy across the globe with his program *Hour of Power*. In 2010, the church was \$55 million in debt, and the church filed for bankruptcy. The building was eventually sold to the Roman Catholic Church.

Can you imagine explaining to Paul or Peter or John that a place that had claimed to be a church had gone bankrupt? That it was so deeply in debt, it had to duck out altogether? What kind of message does this send? What does the world think of Christianity when it hears this?

Of course, we would answer that Crystal Cathedral was never Christian to begin with, but it doesn't change the perception. Does God pay for what He orders? Does God finish what He starts? When God does a true work, does He provide for it – not simply financially, but in every way?

This miracle of our Lord is the answer to that question. This particular miracle of our Lord's is not just another miracle, if we can even use those words. This is the only miracle recorded by all four Gospel writers. It's one of the most powerful displays of Christ's power to this point.

But perhaps the most significant thing about the miracle is the lesson that it was supposed to teach the disciples. In verse 52 of the same chapter, we read that the disciples had not yet understood about the loaves. In chapter 8, Jesus again makes it clear that the disciples had not understood the lesson of the loaves. This miracle was not simply supplying food to hungry stomachs. It was meant to supply faith to hungry souls. The miracle, if properly understood, teaches an absolutely fundamental lesson about the life of a Christian disciple. This is a truth which penetrates everything: the gospel itself, obeying Christ, holiness, serving God, ministry. If you misunderstand this truth, it is like removing oxygen from living things. You cannot come to Him in the first place, or continue with Him if you misunderstand this. Worse, if you do not learn this truth, you will end up wrestling with Him, resisting Him, even complaining against Him, because you misunderstand some of the most basic laws of the Christian life.

It is simply this: what God orders, He pays for. What God commands, He enables. What God requires, He supplies. Our part is trusting obedience. Our part is submissive faith in the all-sufficient Christ. It is His part to provide, supply and make good on his own promises. And yet as basic as this truth is, how everything in us wrestles against it. The flesh does not like faith. We want to step only where we can test the firmness under our feet before we do so. We want to go into the

unknown only if we have a map or GPS first. But if we do not believe that God is and that He is a rewarder of them that diligently seek Him, we will, according to Christ's own words, be guilty of hardened hearts.

This miracle is meant to do for us what it was meant to do for the apostles – teach them the absolute sufficiency of Christ. He is reliable. He is trustworthy. He is the provider. Step out and trust Him. Obey Him and leave it to Him to supply. What He orders, He pays for. What He commands, He enables. What He requires, He supplies.

As we study this, we are supposed to gaze on Christ. We are supposed to watch Him, and then see ourselves in the shoes of the disciples. So let us walk with him through four stages – the exhausted disciples, the extended ministry, the exasperated apostles, and the excellent Christ.

I. The Exhausted Disciples

Mark 6:30-44 ³⁰ *Then the apostles gathered to Jesus and told Him all things, both what they had done and what they had taught.* ³¹ *And He said to them, "Come aside by yourselves to a deserted place and rest a while." For there were many coming and going, and they did not even have time to eat.* ³² *So they departed to a deserted place in the boat by themselves.*

We remember that in verses 7 to 12, Jesus commissioned the apostles to go in twos throughout Galilee and preach, and cast out demons, and to go in faith, trusting in God's provision. They had done that. And they had apparently been so intensively labouring and travelling that they had had no time to eat. Picture a group of twelve men, excited, but exhausted. They are happy, but drained. The crying need is food and rest. Now look at the kind heart of the Lord. He knows they need some time to themselves, where they can simply rest their bodies, recharge, and be ready for the next round of ministry. Jesus wants them to find a secluded place where they will not be assaulted by more ministry needs. So, they get in a boat, and begin to cross one corner of the Lake of Galilee. From Luke's Gospel, we know they were heading to the town of Bethsaida, not far from where Jesus had cast out the legion of demons from the man who lived there.

But I want you to try to imagine the groans that came from the tired twelve apostles as they saw what happened next.

II. The Extended Ministry

³³ *But the multitudes saw them departing, and many knew Him and ran there on foot from all the cities. They arrived before them and came together to Him.* ³⁴ *And Jesus, when He came out, saw a great multitude and was moved with compassion for them, because they were like sheep not having a shepherd. So He began to teach them many things.*

We know from John's Gospel that this was the time of the Passover, and so many thousands of people in Galilee would have been making their way south to Jerusalem. Whole families, and moreover, whole families that had already seen and heard Jesus or His twelve apostles work. These ones, who no longer had John the Baptist, were leaderless and helpless. When they saw Jesus and His apostles get into the little boat, it was not hard for them to outpace the boat, especially as it was crossing just one corner of the lake.

Not merely a few people here and there. We read later that there were five thousand men. If only four thousand of those men were married, and their wives were with them (which they would have been on the way to Jerusalem) and if there were only three children per family, then this was ultimately, by a conservative guess, a crowd of around 21 000 people.

Now look around in the boat. Look at the faces of those twelve, who were longing for a break, looking forward to some quiet, to a good meal, and some sleep. Look at the expressions as they see hundreds, turning into thousands, hurrying along the shore, and they can see that by the time their slow little boat reaches the shore, they will be greeted by the ministry needs of thousands of people. What do their faces look like? Do they look excited? Do they look enthusiastic? I see them groaning, looking at each other, and sighing heavily, wondering if Jesus will have the good sense to send this crowd away. After all, how could He expect any more from them? How could He ask for more ministry, when they are bone-weary, starving, and about to collapse?

But turn your eyes from the apostles onto the face of Jesus, and what expression do you see? Our text tells us. He saw these running families, mothers holding children in their arms, the elderly limping along, the men longing for real spiritual leadership in their lives. He looks at them, and He knows John is dead. He knows the Pharisees care only for themselves.

These are sheep without a shepherd. What happens to sheep without a shepherd? They can't feed themselves. They can't protect themselves. They can't clean themselves. Someone has to lead them to food, and pick out the parasites from their wool, and protect them from wolves, and help them up if they are on their back. I see Jesus perhaps standing in that boat, holding the mast, His eyes scanning the coast, seeing the people, and His expression does not harden. It softens. Our text tells us He was moved with compassion. It is that same expression used only of Jesus. It comes from the word *splanchna*, which referred to the inner organs, the seat of the affections. Jesus was moved inwardly. He deeply felt the need of these people. He deeply felt their hunger for His leadership, as they were chasing Him and His apostles.

No, sorry, apostles, but Jesus is not going to turn them away. Your expected rest has turned into extended ministry. Not less, but more. Not a break, but an intensification. Jesus begins to teach this huge crowd many things. And the exhausted apostles must postpone their refreshment by a few hours, as Jesus patiently provides this crowd with the spiritual food they needed.

Does Jesus know what He is doing? Does Jesus pay for what He orders? Does He know our limits? Is He not a hard master who reaps where He has not sown? The apostles are losing patience. This extended ministry led to

III. The Exasperated Apostles

³⁵ *When the day was now far spent, His disciples came to Him and said, "This is a deserted place, and already the hour is late. ³⁶ "Send them away, that they may go into the surrounding country and villages and buy themselves bread; for they have nothing to eat." ³⁷ But He answered and said to them, "You give them something to eat." And they said to Him, "Shall we go and buy two hundred denarii worth of bread and give them something to eat?"*

After waiting and waiting, you can sense that the apostles have run out of patience. Perhaps while Jesus was teaching, they began to nudge each other, and signal with their eyes that one of them should simply break the news to Jesus. One of them should help Him to understand that He had mismanaged the situation. They needed to explain to Jesus that He had gotten Himself into a situation which was unfortunate for everyone. The apostles were still tired and hungry, and now this crowd of thousands was going to be tired and hungry.

So one of the twelve took the step and told Jesus what to do. "It's late, enough is enough. Dismiss the crowd to go and buy food for themselves."

You can sense that perhaps the apostles' concern is not so much with the crowds getting food, as it is with the crowds moving on. They are tired and hungry and what sort of mood are tired and hungry people usually in? And to these already tired, hungry and irritated apostles, what does Jesus say to their suggestion?

“You give them something to eat.”

Now don't miss this. Jesus is saying to men who are tired of ministering to people, who want the people to go away, He is saying to these men – you meet this need. What kind of need is this? What kind of need is it for twelve men to give 21000 people something to eat? What should be going through the apostles' minds right now? What should they be thinking? Impossible with man – possible with God. If Jesus is telling us to do it, He must have something in store. What God orders, He pays for, What He requires, He supplies. What He commands, He enables.

But instead, what is their reply? They speak like men whose faith cannot see beyond their noses. What, are we supposed to go and buy two hundred denarii worth of bread for this crowd? Two hundred denarii would be about eight months' wages for the average worker – a pretty good sum of money. With that, they could possibly have bought enough food for this crowd, but how they would have carried it back, is another question. The question is sarcastic. “What do you expect? To spend eight months wages to buy food for everyone?”

These men are exasperated. They are possibly even angry. But what is pushing them to anger is that they are missing the lesson of the loaves: what God orders, He pays for.

Like the apostles, we think the life of faith should be sensible, reasonable, or measurable. We think that Christ will only expect of us what we can do. We think that when we are exhausted, ministry ends. We think that when physical resources are absent, ministry must cease. Perhaps we even get angry with God when we sense what He expects. We accuse Him of expecting too much of us and of reaping where He has not sown.

The life of faith means being pushed beyond what you are comfortable with or capable of. But His intention is to reveal more of Himself when the expectation is far beyond our capabilities. He wants to show Himself to be the great, compassionate provider and enabler, but not on our terms. He doesn't do it our way. It is counter-intuitive. God leads three million people not into a valley filled with food, but into a desert. Jesus tells his disciples to go out, taking no money, staff, extra provisions. God tells Gideon to take on the Midianites with 300 men. Elijah tells the widow to collect as many empty jars as possible.

Ours is to trust, present what we have and allow Him to work. When God pushes you to the place where only God can do it, do you say like the twelve spies – there are giants in the land, we cannot go on, or do you say like Caleb and Joshua – our God has promised, and He will perform?

It is in trusting and obeying that you come to see what the mighty Christ can do with your five loaves and two fish.

IV. The Excellent Christ

³⁸ But He said to them, "How many loaves do you have? Go and see." And when they found out they said, "Five, and two fish." ³⁹ Then He commanded them to make them all sit down in groups on the green grass.

⁴⁰ So they sat down in ranks, in hundreds and in fifties. ⁴¹ And when He had taken the five loaves and the two fish, He looked up to heaven, blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to His disciples to set before

them; and the two fish He divided among them all. ⁴² So they all ate and were filled. ⁴³ And they took up twelve baskets full of fragments and of the fish. ⁴⁴ Now those who had eaten the loaves were about five thousand men.

Our Lord patiently asks these apostles how much food they actually have. And you can't help chuckling at the twelve, who were so disorganised that they did not have a crumb of food themselves, and had to find some poor boy, whose mother had packed him a lunch. Whoever the young lad was, he was about to find out what happens when you give your all to Christ, and trust Him with everything.

The bread here was barley loaves, more like wafers, and the fish were the tiny fish, like pickled herrings or sardines. These tiny fish would be eaten on these thin crackers. Jesus gets the five loaves and the two small fish, and then tells His apostles to organise this massive crowd into groups. He prays, and then we see the glory of the Creator doing what only He can do. We don't know exactly how it went, but we are told He broke the loaves and divided the fish, while the disciples distributed it to the crowd.

I picture each apostle coming up with some make-shift basket, and Jesus breaks the bread, and breaks it, but as He breaks it, it in His hand, it is not smaller, it is doubled, and He keeps breaking and breaking, to the wide eyes and speechless expression of the apostle standing in front of Him. Likewise the fish, pulling apart the dried and salted fish, but it is not simply in two, it is now four, and then eight, and sixteen, and 32, until the basket is full, and the apostle heads off to his group of fifty or a hundred, then the next apostle comes. And as the apostles feed each group, there Jesus stands, breaking and breaking, and dividing and dividing, and mark it – creating and creating. These are fish that never swam. This is barley bread that was never planted.

Is there enough for this crowd that diligently sought Jesus? Verse 42 tells you. They all ate and were filled. The word for filled means absolutely satisfied, gorged. The amount of food here was not a few tantalising appetisers. This was food enough to completely satisfy every single person in the crowd of more than 20 000 and since God is not a God of waste, the leftovers are picked up. And how many baskets are filled? Twelve. How many apostles were there? Would these hungry apostles be fed that day? Would they have enough? Would Jesus meet their need?

Here were these men, irritated that the crowd followed, tired of waiting on them, exasperated when Jesus said they should feed this crowd. Now, once they submitted to the truth that God always pays for what He orders, not only did they see again that their leader was God in the flesh, but they had their own needs met.

Philippians 4:19 ¹⁹ *And my God shall supply all your need according to His riches in glory by Christ Jesus.*

2 Corinthians 9:8 ⁸ *And God is able to make all grace abound toward you, that you, always having all sufficiency in all things, may have an abundance for every good work.*

“What He is today we shall find Him tomorrow and the next day and the next year. He is not hard to please, though He may be hard to satisfy. He expects of us only what He has Himself first supplied”
- A.W. Tozer.

We are like the apostles. We have a tendency to reduce Christian ministry to what can be humanly done. Some choose to test the promises of God only as far as their human reason can take them. Some will step out only as far as it makes sense to them, as far as it appears reasonable or sensible or workable. They make no room for faith and then they complain that God is not real to them.

They make no space for the remarkable and then complain that their Christian life is predictable.

2 Corinthians 4:7-10 ⁷ *But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellence of the power may be of God and not of us.* ⁸ *We are hard pressed on every side, yet not crushed; we are perplexed, but not in despair;* ⁹ *persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed --* ¹⁰ *always carrying about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus, that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body.*

2 Corinthians 1:8-10 ⁸ *For we do not want you to be ignorant, brethren, of our trouble which came to us in Asia: that we were burdened beyond measure, above strength, so that we despaired even of life.* ⁹ *Yes, we had the sentence of death in ourselves, that we should not trust in ourselves but in God who raises the dead,* ¹⁰ *who delivered us from so great a death, and does deliver us; in whom we trust that He will still deliver us,*

Maybe for you, your sense of frustration with God is a fearfulness to witness. Perhaps it is a fearfulness to pursue more training for ministry, or to take the next step towards full-time ministry or missions. Maybe you are fearful to volunteer to serve; fearful to take the next step in your discipleship – baptism, membership, service, getting involved, starting a Bible study. You look at the task and you feel upset that God would ask so much of you. Doesn't He know that if I do this I will burn out? Doesn't He know that I can't be expected to do this if I don't have clear signs? Shall we buy this crowd food with eight months' wages? Where's that supposed to come from?

God pays for what He orders. He supplies what He requires. He enables what He commands.

There are three kinds of Christians. The first are the kind who want God to work for them. They want God to fix up their lives, orbit around them, and be a personal genie for all their needs and wants. The second are the kind who want to work for God. They have all sorts of ambition for God, plans and thoughts. They are like Peter, telling Jesus he wants to build three tabernacles for Jesus, Moses and Elijah. The third are the kind who work with God. They become co-labourers with God. But when you labour with God, you find that the way He works is not our way. His way does not always add up. To work with God is to be initiated in the life of faith. Here you may be pressed on every side, perplexed, persecuted, even struck down. But not crushed, in despair, forsaken or destroyed. Why? Because God will keep His promises.

George Muller called it his holy argument. You remember that Muller started five orphan houses, cared for 10 024 orphans and prayed in, what would be R1,2 billion, for the care of his orphans and ministry, without once asking for help or advertising his needs.

He said "By the help of God, this shall be my argument before Him, respecting the orphans, in the hour of need. He is a Father, and therefore has pledged Himself, as it were, to provide for them; and I have only to remind Him of the need of these poor children in order to have it supplied."

Holy argument. What God orders, He pays for. I don't know the area where God is calling you to step up and trust Him, but will you hear George Muller's words, in light of a Christ who can feed 21 000 people out of His bare hands?

"My dear Christian reader, will you not try this way? Will you not know for yourself . . . the preciousness and the happiness of this way of casting all your cares and burdens and necessities upon God? This way is as open to you as to me. . . . Every one is invited and commanded to trust in the Lord, to trust in Him with all his heart, and to cast his burden upon Him, and to call upon Him in the day of trouble. Will you not do this, my dear brethren in Christ? I long that you may do so. I desire that you may taste the sweetness of that state of heart, in which, while surrounded by difficulties and necessities, you can yet be at peace, because you know that the living God, your Father in heaven, cares for you."