

Luke 4:14-9:50 records Jesus' ministry in Galilee. The district of Galilee was fairly small, about 25 miles wide and 50 miles long. The lake takes up part of that. There were about 200 small villages that crowded around the lake, most of them at its northern end. So it didn't take long for news about Jesus to spread. In fact, there was no way to avoid it. He had done some outstanding miracles including stilling a storm, raising the dead, and casting thousands of demons out of a man. He was doing miracles day after day, month after month, wherever He went. The crowds that sought Him were growing enormous.

The passage before us takes place during the Passover in the spring (Mar – Apr) of 29 A.D.; the opportunity for Galilee is coming to an end.

9:10 When the apostles returned, they gave an account to Him of all that they had done. Taking them with Him, He withdrew by Himself to a city called Bethsaida.

Jesus had sent the disciples out two by two as apostles (Lk. 9:1-9) to be His representatives in proclaiming the Kingdom of God. He had also empowered them with authority over demons and disease. In verse 10 they had come back and gave an account to Jesus of all they had done.

There is no question that the disciples' experience was very taxing. Their preaching and healing ministry most likely drew constant crowds of people. They had been instructed not to carry anything with them, but to trust God's provision on a daily basis. They were staying in people's homes; they were eating whatever people gave them to eat. It would have been a very difficult and challenging time; after weeks of this, they would have been exhausted. Jesus understood their weariness and their need for rest.

In Mark 6:31-32 Jesus said, "'Come away by yourselves to a secluded place and rest a while.' (For there were many people coming and going, and they did not even have time to eat.) They went away in the boat to a secluded place by themselves." Luke 9:10 says, "Taking them with Him, He withdrew by Himself to a city called Bethsaida;" however, it becomes clear that they didn't actually go into the village itself, but to an isolated place near it.

The location of Bethsaida is unknown today, but it was a fishing village on the northeast shore of the Sea of Galilee in the district of Perea which was ruled by Herod's brother, Philip the Tetrarch; Philip named the town after the daughter of Caesar Augustus.

Bethsaida has some importance to Christians, for Peter, Andrew, Philip, and probably Nathanael were from there (Jn. 1:43, 44); four out of twelve apostles coming from this little village make it pretty unique.

9:11(a) But the crowds were aware of this and followed Him;

Jesus and the apostles could not get away from the multitudes no matter how much they needed rest. Mark 6:33-34 says, "The people saw them going and recognizing them, ran on foot from all the cities, getting there ahead of them. When Jesus went ashore, He saw a large crowd. . ." In other words, when people saw the band of men leaving to go across the lake, they ran along the shoreline, perhaps tracking

the boat as they went, and actually beat the boat to its destination. When Jesus and the disciples arrived, there was already a crowd of thousands waiting for them. John 6:2 says they sought out Jesus "because they were seeing the signs which He was performing on those who were sick."

9:11(b) and welcoming them, He began speaking to them about the kingdom of God and curing those who had need of healing.

It wouldn't have been unkind of Jesus to avoid the crowd, sail to another location, and get some respite. There was probably nothing that was so pressing that it needed their attention that second. But verse 11 says that He *welcomed* them. Mark 6:34 says, "He felt compassion for them because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and He began to teach them many things." Though Jesus and the disciples desperately needed rest, the crowd desperately needed truth, so Jesus stayed.

Jesus welcomed the crowd because He saw them as people in need. They were superficial, fickle, miracle-seeking people, but they were also spiritually impoverished and many were physically oppressed. They needed a shepherd; they needed physical deliverance. So verse 11 says, "He began speaking to them about the kingdom of God and curing those who had need of healing."

The Feeding of the Five-Thousand - Luke 9:12-17; Matthew 14:15-21; Mark 6:35-44; John 6:4-13

The miracle of feeding the 5,000 is so familiar to Christians that the magnitude and importance of what actually took place is often brushed over. The resurrection and the feeding of the 5,000 are the only two miracles that are recorded in all four gospels and all four gospels see this miracle as a climactic feature in the Lord's ministry. After this, Jesus would leave Galilee, go to Tyre and Sidon for a short time, then to the Decapolis, and finally south to Jerusalem where He would give His life for sinners.

The initial impact of the miracle on the crowds cannot be overstated. It says in John 6:14, "when the people saw the sign which He had performed, they said, 'This is truly the Prophet who is to come into the world.'" And in John 6:15 they wanted to "take Him by force to make Him king."

Throughout the ministry of Jesus, the sympathy, compassion, kindness, and sufficiency of God for every human need was on display. He had already shown great tenderness toward people and most recently in His concern for the disciples' weariness. In this miracle, Jesus' compassion will be manifested on a grand scale, on the largest possible stage. Quantitatively, this is the biggest miracle Jesus did and it is a miracle of sympathy, a miracle of compassion in feeding the crowd.

However, it was also through this miracle that the resistance, rebellion, and unbelief of Galilee became clear. It leads to the defining rejection of Jesus in Galilee and His gradual exit from the region. From this point on, the focus turns toward His death.

9:12 Now the day was ending, and the twelve came and said to Him, "Send the crowd away, that they may go into the surrounding villages and countryside and find lodging and get something to eat; for here we are in a desolate place."

It is always strange to read of the disciples commanding Jesus to do something, but their comment sets the stage for the miracle that is to follow.

The disciples recognized that it was getting late, that people would be getting hungry, and that they were in a desolate place. There was nowhere nearby to get food or to lodge. If the people left now, they would be able to make their way to the surrounding villages to find lodging and get food before it got too dark.

**9:13 But He said to them, "You give them something to eat!" And they said, "We have no more than five loaves and two fish, unless perhaps we go and buy food for all these people."
9:14(a) (For there were about five thousand men.)**

Jesus' response is both amazing and surprising. He tells *the disciples* to feed the people!

John 6:5-9 fills in some more details:

5 Therefore Jesus, lifting up His eyes and seeing that a large crowd was coming to Him, said to Philip, "Where are we to buy bread, so that these may eat?"

6 This He was saying to test him, for He Himself knew what He was intending to do.

7 Philip answered Him, "Two hundred denarii worth of bread is not sufficient for them, for everyone to receive a little."

8 One of His disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, said to Him,

9 "There is a lad here who has five barley loaves and two fish, but what are these for so many people?"

Philip was the logical person to ask where to buy bread since he had lived in nearby Bethsaida (Jn. 1:44); however, John makes it clear that the purpose of asking Phillip was to test him, not because Jesus was stumped on what needed to be done (Carson, *The Gospel of John*, 269; Bruce, *The Gospel of John*, 143).

Philip answered Him, "Two hundred denarii worth of bread is not sufficient for them, for everyone to receive a little" (Jn. 6:7). The denarius was the usual pay for a day's labor (Mt 20:2, 9, 13; RWP), so 200 denarii would be about 7 months' wages. Considering that a day's wage was only enough to feed a small family for a day, 200 denarii would barely feed 800 people (Carson, 269).

Evidently, Andrew knew Jesus' request and had gone on a reconnaissance mission to see what food he could muster up. The outcome was hopeless; all he could find were two small fish and five barely cakes that a young boy had with him (Jn. 6:8, 9).

A barley cake was a small flat bread that was baked on a hot stone (Bruce, 144), and was considered to be an inferior sort of bread used by the poor (RWP, Carson, 270; Morris, 344). They were more the size of pita bread than as a loaf of bread as we know it. Small, salted, dried or pickled fish were commonly eaten as a side dish or as a relish with bread (Plummer, 149, Carson, 270; Bruce, 144; Morris, 344). Andrew's point, of course, was that this tiny meal was ludicrously inadequate for the need. Luke mentions it to heighten the miracle.

The feeding of the 5000 was probably the most massive miracle that Jesus performed. Luke 9:14 says, "there were about five thousand men." The word for "men" in Greek specifically means "males." Matthew 14:21 says, "There were about five thousand men who ate, besides women and children." There could have been just as many woman and children as well. A conservative guess would be that Jesus fed over 10,000 people (but He could have fed up to 20,000 people; Carson, EBC, Matthew, 342).

**9:14(b) And He said to His disciples, "Have them sit down to eat in groups of about fifty each."
9:15 They did so, and had them all sit down.**

After the disciples made it clear that there was no possibility of them feeding the crowd, Jesus, in Luke 9:14, makes another surprising statement: "Have them sit down to eat in groups of fifty." Jesus wanted them organized to make it easier to serve food. The disciples had to have been stunned. "Have them sit down *to eat*?" There was no food to serve!

The passage reminds us of a number of OT passages. One passage is II Kings 4:42-44. In this passage, Elisha tells his servant to feed 100 men with the 20 barley loaves and some ears of corn. The servant asked, "How can I set this before a hundred men?" Elisha responded by saying that YHWH had told him there would be enough to feed them all with even some left over. "So he set it before them, and they ate and had some left over, according to the word of the LORD" (2 Ki. 4:44). Likewise, I Kings 17:16 tells of Elijah's miraculous increase in oil and meal. However, considering the many parallels in John 6 to the Israelites' wilderness experience, perhaps the most significant OT passage is in Numbers 11. A dialogue takes place between Moses and God where the progression is similar to that of the miracle here. Moses asked God, "Where am I to get meat to give to all these people?" (Nu. 11:13). Then he said there are 600,000 people . . . "Should flocks and herds be slaughtered for them, to be sufficient for them? Or should all the fish of the sea be gathered together for them, to be sufficient for them?" (Nu. 11:21-22). Moses saw the numbers and the supplies and reasoned that it was impossible to feed so many people with so little. This was the same conclusion that the disciples had come to; there were too many people and not enough resources – it was impossible. The story ends with God feeding the people by sending thousands of quail. What Moses needed to learn is in verse 23: "Is the LORD'S power limited?" The challenge was if Moses could believe that God could do what seemed impossible. Did the disciples need to learn the same lesson? Could Jesus' test have been that He expected Philip to recall what God had done and act in faith? The disciples' faith was at the point where it should have grown. They had just come back from a mission of several weeks, where *they* cast out demons, healed the sick, and even raised the dead. They also knew that Jesus could control wind, waves, fish, animals, and demons. They were present when He had turned water into wine which John says manifested Jesus' glory and resulted in His disciples believing in Him (Jn. 2:11). Although they may have been initially overwhelmed by Jesus' request that *they* feed the crowd, they should have thought beyond natural means of provision.

9:16 Then He took the five loaves and the two fish, and looking up to heaven, He blessed them, and broke them, and kept giving them to the disciples to set before the people.

Jesus did what every Jewish father did at every meal. He placed His hands on the food, looked up to heaven in acknowledgment that the food came from God, and blessed it (9:16: "them" that is, the

loaves and the fish). A common prayer was “Blessed art Thou, O Lord our God, King of the universe, who brings forth bread from the earth” (Carson, 270; Bruce, 145). Despite the huge crowd and miniscule quantity of food, Jesus proceeds as usual without much concern. He then had the disciples distribute the food.

The NASB does a good job in distinguishing between the verb tenses that Luke uses in verse 16. “Broke” is the aorist tense, indicating a single, past action. He broke the food apart as He prayed, but then He “kept giving” (the imperfect tense expresses a continuous action) the food to the disciples to set before the people. “This supplies a hint as to the way of working the miracle. Each disciple kept coming to Him for a fresh supply of bread” (Pulpit Commentary). The miracle “took place between the act of breaking and the continuous distribution” (Cambridge Bible for Schools and Colleges).

Pondering this is mind-boggling. The fish that came from Jesus’ hands had not developed from an egg and grown into an adult. They had never swum in the lake nor had they been caught by fishermen or salted and dried in the sun. The bread didn’t come from barley that had been grown for months, nor was it ever harvested, ground, mixed with water and salt and cooked on a heated stone. This was a creative miracle. It was a display of messianic power that shows Jesus’ ability to bring about the lavish feast of the kingdom. Isaiah 25:6-9 says, “The LORD of hosts will prepare a lavish banquet for all peoples on this mountain; A banquet of aged wine, choice pieces with marrow, and refined, aged wine. . . He will swallow up death for all time, and the Lord GOD will wipe tears away from all faces. . . And it will be said in that day, ‘Behold, this is our God for whom we have waited that He might save us. This is the LORD for whom we have waited; Let us rejoice and be glad in His salvation.’”

9:17 And they all ate and were satisfied; and the broken pieces which they had left over were picked up, twelve baskets full.

This was not just a symbolic act. “They all ate.” Nor was it just a snack. They “were satisfied.”

Jesus once again exhibits God’s concern for people. Missing a meal was not a life or death issue. People in those days had far less food than Americans do and regular meals were not the luxury of many. But Jesus was concerned about their needs and His concern is a testimony of God’s goodness. God understands human hunger. He understands the delight that food can bring. In Acts 14:17 Paul speaks of this. He says, that God “did not leave Himself without witness, in that He did good and gave you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, satisfying your hearts with food and gladness.” God gives sinful men food out of the pleasure He has to bring them satisfaction and fill them with gladness. The act is so astonishing because Jesus is feeding the crowd out of His kindness and concern for them; the crowd, however, are the people who would soon reject Him (Jn. 6) and would someday be in Jerusalem screaming for His crucifixion.

Considering that the number twelve is the very last word of the story (an emphatic position in Greek) and that all four gospels mention the number of baskets, it seems that it has some significance. Some say “twelve” baskets full show that all twelve apostles were personally involved in the miracle. Others think that Jesus was providing for them. When the same story is read in John, there are numerous connections to the wanderings of Israel; thus, many think it is an allusion to the twelve tribes of Israel.

Some say it symbolized that the Messiah can meet the needs of the nation. Others believe it is a foretaste of the kingdom blessings. None of these are far-fetched ideas. One thing that can be said with certainty is that there was an overabundance in Jesus' provision; people ate, were satisfied, and there was even more that was left.

Tragically, the story has a dismal ending. That evening, Jesus crossed the lake leaving the crowd behind. John 6 says, "When the crowd saw that Jesus was not there, nor His disciples, they themselves got into the small boats, and came to Capernaum seeking Jesus. When they found Him on the other side of the sea they said to Him, 'Rabbi, when did You get here?' Jesus answered them and said, '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.' Therefore they said to Him, 'What shall we do, so that we may work the works of God?' Jesus answered and said to them, 'This is the work of God, that you believe in Him whom He has sent.' So they said to Him, 'What then do You do for a sign, so that we may see, and believe You? What work do You perform? Our fathers ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written, "He gave them bread out of heaven to eat."' Jesus then said to them, 'Truly, truly, I say to you, it is not Moses who has given you the bread out of heaven, but it is My Father who gives you the true bread out of heaven. For the bread of God is that which comes down out of heaven, and gives life to the world.' Then they said to Him, 'Lord, always give us this bread.' Jesus said to them, 'I am the bread of life; he who comes to Me will not hunger, and he who believes in Me will never thirst. But I said to you that you have seen Me, and yet do not believe.'" (Jn. 6:24-36)

Miracles do not generate faith. The crowd of over 5,000 people had eaten bread and fish created directly by the hand of Christ and yet they still asked, "What then do You do for a sign, so that we may see, and believe You? What work do You perform?" In spite of their participation in a miracle, they only saw a free meal. Jesus said to them, "you seek Me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate of the loaves and were filled." They could have found Jesus, the Bread of Life. They could have never hungered or thirsted again. But instead, their unbelief blinded them and they then faced a greater judgment. In Luke 10:13-14 Jesus says, ". . . Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the miracles had been performed in Tyre and Sidon which occurred in you, they would have repented long ago . . . But it will be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon in the judgment than for you."