

Our Lord's miracles teach. The miracle we hear of in today's Gospel, the well-known feeding of the five thousand, is unique in that it is the only miracle recorded in all four Gospels. The particular blessing given us by God in John's Gospel, is that we have a direct explanation by Jesus of what this particular miracle is intended to teach. It follows after today's Gospel in verses 26–58.

His teaching is a corrective to a false, worldly understanding of His giving bread. The multitude sees in Jesus a prophet. He's like Moses, one who can give them bread on demand, sustain them day by day as their fathers in the wilderness were fed by the manna. They see a candidate for kingship. We are told at the end of today's Gospel that they are ready to seize Him; presumably overthrow if not the Romans, then certainly Herod. Here is a working toward what their fathers had enjoyed under David, Solomon, and the other godly kings of old: freedom, independence, home rule.

Jesus' teaching exposes the lack of understanding not just for the multitudes then, but also now. What our Lord teaches in this miracle is crucial for today, because for years, decades, and more recently, happening right now in direct connection with the conflict with Iran, heard from the mouths of many powerful and influential leaders in our nation's government and military, is the very same misunderstanding that Jesus sought to correct two thousand years ago.

All the way back in Genesis chapter 12, the first time God comes to Abraham, He promises land, He promises descendants, and He promises that from Abraham, in Abraham's seed, his offspring, all the nations of the earth would be blessed. Continuing on from that point through Genesis we see God fulfilling that promise of many descendants. Abraham's wife, Sarah, once aged and barren, becomes a mother. She bears Isaac, who in turn fathers Jacob, who in turn fathers the twelve sons, the heads of the tribes of Israel. Between Genesis and Exodus, those seventy who went down into Egypt multiplied and grew exceedingly.

Exodus is the beginning of God's fulfilling the promise to give these people the land of Canaan. That's what He says to Moses at the burning bush, it's what He speaks of soon after Israel arrives at Sinai in Exodus 23. The story of that promise being fulfilled spans through the rest of the Torah as the people of Israel are given the Law by which they shall live in that land and journey to the threshold of entering into it. That is where things stand at the end of Deuteronomy. The Books of Joshua, Judges, First and Second Samuel, and First Kings, tell us how God gave them that land, culminating in the reigns of David and Solomon, where God's people possess the land that was indeed promised them.

In the course of all that history, and especially as God was bringing them to the land He would give them, God provided for the needs of His people, giving them bread and quail to eat, water to drink. This miraculous sustaining of God's people is one of the most significant episodes in the history of ancient Israel. It was one of the chief examples of God's care and provision for His people.

The Bible recalls this repeatedly. Moses reminds the people twice in Deuteronomy of God's gracious care for them. Joshua tells us how the manna ceased to fall the day after the first Passover Israel kept in the promised land. After the return from Exile, the Levites recounted before the people the gift of manna to their fathers. Psalm 78 meditates upon it thus, "**He rained down on them manna to eat and gave them the grain of heaven. Man ate of the bread of the angels' He sent them food in abundance,**" and

Psalm 105, “**He...gave them bread from heaven in abundance.**” So significant was this bread, that God commanded Moses to have Aaron keep a jar of it with the ark of the covenant, alongside the tablets of the Law. It is a powerful illustration of God’s care for the body and life of His creation, not just then, but also now, for us.

The problem was that many of Jesus’ hearers stopped there. It was about them as a people, the land as their land, and seeking God’s giving hand to provide for their needs in this body and life. That’s what God did for their fathers, and it’s what they wanted Him to do for them through Jesus. Not just here in John chapter 6, but throughout, that is what many of the Lord’s hearers and followers seek from Him. That was the picture many had of the Messiah, an earthly king, a savior from physical distress, to deliver from political enemies. It is one of the main objections to Jesus as Messiah in Judaism today. The Messiah was to bring peace, and it doesn’t look, from history, as though that happened. War and bloodshed has continued for the last 2,000 years. There is a stop at the things of this life, this body.

This point is also where many a Christian today stops. That God’s promises to Abraham were just about a particular people and a particular land forever. It is that understanding of the Bible that is used to justify unchanging, unquestioned political, economic, and military support for the modern state of Israel because of what God promises Abraham in Genesis 12.

A prominent senator recently said that his main guiding principle as a senator is to ensure that America blesses Israel so that America can be blessed. A former governor, the current ambassador of our nation to Israel, says it would be fine if Israel took all the land promised to Abraham in Genesis, everything between the Euphrates and Nile rivers. That’s all of Israel, Palestine, Jordan, Lebanon, most of Syria and Iraq, parts of Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, that by divine right, those lands belong to the physical descendants of Jacob, the Jewish people.

Countless American Christians, many prominent pastors, teach that our nation, and especially Christians, must support this. Indeed, that the restoration and expansion of Israel, the rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem, is necessary in order for Jesus to return.

But you might recall, there is a third promise in Genesis 12. Given not just then to Abraham, but also to Isaac and Jacob. It is affirmed just as much as the land and many descendants, indeed, many more promises are given to build upon this third promise. There is a third plot line in the Old Testament history tied to the people and the land, and that is the One, not a whole people, but the One Offspring of Abraham through whom all the world is blessed. This is the promise of the Messiah, the Savior. To be sure, He is the glory of the people Israel. It was to them that God’s revelation was given, but the Messiah of Israel is also the light to the Gentiles, to all the nations, because in Him not only is a particular people delivered from worldly enemies and oppression, but all humanity is reconciled to God and given everlasting life, delivered from captivity in sin and bondage to Satan. This is the good news of great joy for all people.

Jesus says it’s no longer about earthly goods, bread, land, family, and nations. “**Do not work for the food that perishes,**” Jesus says, “**but for the food that endures to eternal life.**” “**The true bread,**” Jesus says, “**is He who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.**” As much as we do need bread for the body, even more we need the flesh of Jesus, given up to give life to the world.

It’s no longer about the Jews, descendants of Abraham by blood, or about Gentiles, every or anyone else, as God’s chosen race to the exclusion of others. The true chosen people of God are the elect from every

nation, once dead stones, baptized into Christ, made one Christ Jesus, sons of Abraham not by flesh and blood, but by God's working faith in His Son: **"This is the work of God, that you believe in Him whom He has sent."**

It's no longer about any specific plot of geography on this earth. He will say to Pilate when He is charged with being a king, a threat to Caesar, **"My kingdom is not of this world."** The true land, the land promised to God's chosen, is the kingdom that has been prepared for us from the foundation of the world.

It is not about waiting to rebuild the temple upon the Temple Mount in Jerusalem. The true temple is Jesus Himself. His body is the meeting place where God dwells with men and is present wherever His Word is preached and His Sacraments are given. To be frank it is anti-Christian blasphemy to say that there needs to be another temple built, the old sacrifices of animals and the offering of blood restored. That was put to an end by Jesus' once for all sacrifice on the cross.

The heart of the Bible, Old and New Testament, is not the ethnic people or land of Israel, it is Jesus Christ. It is in Him that all of God's promises find their "Yes." All of God's promises are fulfilled in Jesus. That is why He is our joy, the One to whom we look and flee for consolation and strength. He does give relief already in this life, graciously feeds the 5,000, gives us everything that we need in this body and life. But He has not come just for that. His life is not so cheap as to ensure mere worldly blessings. With this miracle at Passover, He points ahead to another Paschal Feast, that which we will commemorate beginning in but two weeks, where His flesh will be given up for the life of the world, His blood shed for our sins. Every need is satisfied in Him, His giving.

We pray for the peace of Jerusalem, for all violence to cease in this world. But it is for our Lord's Word, His Gospel, His Kingdom, that we contend, for in it alone do we find blessing and peace with God.