

“FEEDING THE FIVE THOUSAND”

Matthew 14:13-21

During His earthly ministry, Jesus performed many miracles. He healed the sick. He controlled the weather and walked on water. He cast out demons and changed water into wine. He raised the dead—Lazarus; the daughter of Jairus; the son of the widow from Nain. Jesus performed these miracles not only to help and heal, to restore and liberate; but also to prove that He was exactly who He claimed to be: the Son of God and the only Savior of lost humanity.

And so, when beginning His ministry in Nazareth, Jesus announced: **“The Spirit of the Lord is on Me, because He has anointed Me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor,”** Luke 4:18-19.

Yet, the miracles of Jesus recorded in the New Testament are only a small percentage of all His miraculous deeds. The apostle John wrote in his Gospel: **“Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of His disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in His name,”** John 20:30-31. John went on to say, **“Jesus did many other things as well. If every one of them were written down, I suppose that even the whole world would not have room for the books that would be written,”** John 21:25.

Of all Christ’s miracles, however, only one is recorded in all four Gospels: Matthew 14, Mark 6, Luke 9, and John 6. And that one miracle is the *Feeding of the Five Thousand*. Why this fourfold repetition? Why is this miracle recorded four times, when the *Feeding of the Four Thousand* is recorded only twice; and when an astonishing miracle like the resurrection of Lazarus is recorded only once?

Interesting questions, with no direct answer provided in Scripture. Yet, perhaps the answer is as simple as this: In the *Feeding of the Five Thousand*, which occurred before the *Feeding of the Four Thousand*—thus, the first miracle of its kind, we learn so many comforting truths about our Savior; not in an extraordinary context like a cemetery at Bethany or a tempestuous storm on the Sea of Galilee, but in a context as commonplace as our daily need to eat.

In the *Feeding of the Five Thousand*, Jesus displayed His compassion, involvement, power, and generosity. These are the characteristics of our Savior that each of us must remember, especially in times of trouble, heartache, sorrow, and loss.

First, the Savior's great compassion. In the 1980s a Jewish rabbi named Harold Kushner wrote a wildly popular book titled *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*. It's understandable that Kushner would write such a book. His own son died at a young age. And as Kushner watched the boy grow weaker and sicker, he wrestled with the age-old question of why such a bad thing would happen to such a good person. I can only imagine his grief, pain, and loss.

Eventually, Kushner concluded there were only three possible reasons for human suffering: (A) God does not exist; (B) God is limited in His abilities; and (C) God is evil. As a Jewish rabbi, Kushner could neither deny the existence of God, nor accuse God of being evil. This left him with option (B): God is limited; that is, God is not all-powerful, not all-knowing, and not always present.

In practical terms, God wants to help us, but some circumstances are beyond His power and control. God wants to be with us, but He can't be everywhere and with everyone at the same time—similar to the complaints of Mary and Martha: 'Lord, if You had been here, my brother would not have died.' Likewise, God wants to keep us safe from all harm and danger, but He doesn't know everything that will happen.

Is this the God revealed in the Bible? No. The God revealed in the Bible is omnipotent, omnipresent, and omniscient. But He is much more too, including infinitely compassionate. The psalmist wrote: **"The LORD is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love;"** and again, **"As a father has compassion on his children, so the LORD has compassion on those who fear Him,"** Psalm 103:8,13.

The apostle James wrote—in a context of Christian trials and persecution: **"Brothers, as an example of patience in the face of suffering, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord. As you know, we consider blessed those who have persevered. You have heard of Job's perseverance and have seen what the Lord finally brought about. The Lord is full of compassion and mercy,"** James 5:10-11. And there are multitudes of other such passages that bear witness to God's great compassion.

For all of Kushner's good intentions in addressing a difficult subject—the matter of human suffering, he did not fully understand the God of the Old Testament; nor did he come to see the same God more fully and more gloriously revealed in the New Testament through the Person and Work of Jesus Christ. Is God limited in any way? Is there ever a time when God doesn't know what is happening in our lives or when God fails to care about our personal circumstances? The answers are no, no, and no.

Regardless of what we ourselves may be tempted to think of God when going through difficulties—"God, why did You let this happen; this illness; this job loss; this broken marriage; this foreclosure or bankruptcy or automobile accident?"—God does

have the utmost compassion for us; even to the degree of caring about our growling stomachs.

Read Matthew 14:14. **“When Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, He had compassion on them and healed their sick.”** Who had compassion on whom—at first sight; before one person said “Jesus, I’m sick” or another person said “Jesus, I’m hungry”? Or read Matthew 15:32, the *Feeding of the Four Thousand*, where the same description is given of Christ’s compassion: **“I have compassion for these people,”** said Jesus; **“they have already been with Me three days and have nothing to eat. I do not want to send them away hungry, or they may collapse along the way.”**

Why should God, being God, care about such matters—whether we eat or get sick or arrive safely home? Because compassion is part of God’s nature. And dear friends, rejoice in this fact and in this God. Imagine if God were otherwise; uncaring, indifferent, capricious, hostile; accusations so often wrongly leveled against Him.

Don’t merely think of Christ’s miracles as acts of great power. Think of them also as acts of great compassion. And so we read in Matthew 9:36, **“When He saw the crowds, He had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep with no shepherd.”** Or Matthew 20:34, at the healing of two blind men: **“Jesus had compassion on them and touched their eyes. Immediately they received their sight and followed Him.”** Or Mark 5:19, at the healing of a demon-possessed man: **“Go home to your family,”** said Jesus, **“and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and how He has had compassion on you.”** Or Luke 7:13, at the raising of a widow’s dead son: **“When the Lord saw her, His heart went out to her and He said, ‘Don’t cry.’ ”**

I can sympathize with a man like Harold Kushner. There is no greater pain than the loss of a child. Yet, understand that a book title like *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* is a flawed theological premise. Flawed, because according to the Bible there are no good people. By nature all people are sinful, deserving only God’s wrath and punishment. Remember Psalm 14:1-2? **“The LORD looks down from heaven on the sons of men to see if there are any who understand, any who seek God. All have turned aside, they have together become corrupt; there is no one who does good, not even one.”**

The great compassion of God is seen in this, that He gives us what we do not deserve—forgiveness, eternal life—through Jesus Christ. In other words, He is a God who cares about every aspect of our lives, from eternal salvation to daily bread. The proof is in the *Feeding of the Five Thousand*, but even more so in the cross of Jesus.

Second, the Savior’s personal involvement. So often we feel compassion for others, don’t we? The homeless man dressed in rags, standing on the corner of Fowler and Colonial, holding a cardboard sign with the crayoned scribble: “VETERAN.

PLEASE HELP. GOD BLESS.” Or the elderly woman at the nursing facility, sitting dejectedly in a wheelchair, wearing a too-big sweater despite the ninety-degree heat. You’ve seen her, haven’t you? The woman who looks as if she’s had no visitors for years, no greeting cards on Christmas or her birthday.

The first month I moved to Fort Myers, I noticed a middle-aged woman sitting on a green metal bench outside of a nearby Publix. Day after day. Hour after hour. Same bench. Same blistering sun. Non-stop smoking between sips of water and fits of coughing. Painfully thin. Now staring at the shoppers. Now staring at her feet. The woman wasn’t homeless, or so I was told when I asked a Publix manager. “I don’t know her name,” said the manager. “But she lives in the apartments across the street. She comes here every day, and has for a long time.”

As the months passed, every time I went to Publix I looked for the woman. Every time I told myself that I would say “hello” or see if she needed anything or even invite her to church. But something always intervened or distracted me. The shopping list became more important than the woman. And then one day, she was gone. Just gone. To my shame, my actions reminded me of a parable about a priest and Levite who hurried past a half-dead man lying in the middle of the road—too busy, too distracted, perhaps even too righteous to get involved. And what if God were like this?

Today’s text is called the *Feeding of the Five Thousand*. In reality, when including women and children, the attendance may have been 30,000. One look at such a crowd, and Jesus could have easily turned away. But He didn’t. Instead, His great compassion moved Him to great action. He miraculously fed each man, each woman, and each child.

I find it ironic, indeed sad, that as Christians we can confess, “I believe in God the Father Almighty, the Maker of heaven and earth;” and furthermore, “in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord; who was conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary; suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried; He descended into hell; the third day He rose again from the dead”—that we can make such a confession, and yet still doubt God’s involvement in our daily lives; and even worse, doubt His ability or willingness to provide our daily bread.

What better demonstrates God’s involvement in our lives than the incarnation of Jesus Christ—His coming to be with us and be one of us? What better demonstrates God’s involvement in even the worst circumstances of our lives than Christ’s death on the cross to atone for all our sins? And if Jesus Christ willingly laid down His life for us, will He not also provide us with a change of clothing and a loaf of bread?

Third, the Savior’s power. This is an obvious lesson from the *Feeding of the Five Thousand*, isn’t it? Jesus is true God. Jesus has all power. Jesus can do everything. I’d like to see even one so-called faith healer, just one, feed 30,000 people from five

loaves of bread and two small fish—or, for that matter, walk on water or change water into wine or raise the dead at the nearest funeral home. Many, if not most, are outright charlatans, who won't even make an appearance without TV cameras, applause, and sizeable donations.

Jesus has the power; we don't. You and I desperately need to learn this lesson. So did the original disciples. According to today's text, the disciples were the ones who brought meal-time to the attention of Jesus. **“As evening approached, the disciples came to Him and said, ‘This is a remote place, and it’s already getting late. Send the crowds away, so they can go to the villages and buy themselves some food,’”** Matthew 14:15.

What was the Savior's response? He told the disciples, **“They do not need to go away. You give them something to eat,”** Matthew 14:16. I would have enjoyed seeing the expression on the disciples' faces at that moment. Most of us panic when a few friends or relatives arrive unannounced for dinner. Try 30,000 people. Perhaps the disciples looked helplessly at each other; and checked their pockets and wallets for loose change; and wondered if they had misunderstood Jesus. The real question is: Why did Jesus give His disciples this impossible task: **“You feed them”**? Because He knew the disciples could not feed the multitudes; and He wanted them to realize that He could.

How many of the disciples learned this lesson? Amazingly, none. One chapter later, Matthew 15 and the *Feeding of the Four Thousand*, the disciples asked Jesus: **“Where could we get enough bread in this remote place to feed such a crowd?”** Only a month or two earlier, in another remote area, the same disciples had witnessed the same Jesus miraculously feed the same sort of massive crowd. And still they asked, ‘Where can we get food to feed all these people.’ <SIGH>.

Perhaps we can forgive the disciples, indeed, understand the disciples, because we have all done the same, haven't we? How many times has God delivered each one of us from heartache, trouble, loss, pain, troubled relationships, guilt, and sin? How many times has God provided for this congregation over the years?

Somewhere I remember reading—oh yes, that's right. Matthew 28 and these words of Jesus: **“All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations.”** All authority, He said. All power. Which means, to use the analogy of today's text, Jesus is the one who miraculously provides the meal. All we do is distribute the food and collect the leftovers.

And this is the final important point for this morning—brief though it is; namely, **the Savior's generosity**. When the Lord blesses us, He always provides leftovers, that is, far more than we need, and far more than we deserve. **“Taking the five loaves and the two fish and looking up to heaven, He gave thanks and broke the loaves. Then He gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the people. They all**

ate and were satisfied, and the disciples picked up twelve basketfuls of broken pieces that were left over,” Matthew 14:19-20. Of Jesus John wrote, **“From the fullness of His grace we have all received one blessing after another,”** John 1:16.

When I was a small child, my family’s Sunday schedule was invariably the same. First we went to church. Then we went to my grandparents’ home for lunch. I have such joyful memories of those Sunday meals. Adults at the dining room table. Kids at the card table. Chatter. Laughter. Clinking silverware. My grandmother’s fried chicken, which was so tender it willingly fell off the bone.

Years later, after I’d left home and entered the ministry, I still called my grandparents’ home on Sunday afternoons; knowing my family would be there; almost smelling that fried chicken over two thousand miles of telephone wire. In fact, I’ve never forgotten the phone number: 863-293-6621. Some Sundays, I’m still tempted to call it, though my grandparents and parents have all gone to be with the Lord. I remember those Sunday meals with such clarity because they were so meaningful; because those meals gave us the opportunity to learn so much about each other.

In the days, months, and years ahead, remember the meal you shared with Jesus today—especially in times of adversity and heartache. Remember His compassion for you. Remember His involvement in your life. Remember His power at work in your problems and salvation. And remember His generosity; the generosity with which He laid down His life for all your sins and will provide for all your daily needs.

“Come, Lord, Jesus, be our Guest;
and let Your gifts to us be blessed.”