



Feeding of the Five Thousand

John 6:1-14

February 5, 2025, Sugar Land Baptist Church

The Setting: A Great Crowd on a Hillside (6:1-4).

- John describes the fourth sign as happening some ambiguous amount of time after the healing of the lame man in Jerusalem (v 1).
- John refers to the Sea of Galilee by its common name in the New Testament and by what it was called later in the first century, the Sea of Tiberias.
- John identifies those who will benefit from this fourth sign, a great crowd of people (v 2).
 - The crowd has followed Jesus because they witnessed Jesus's healing of the sick.
 - We also pick up that the Jewish Passover Festival was near, perhaps adding to the crowds.
 - The reference to the Passover also sets the stage for the sign. During the Passover, the people recalled their past deliverance from Egypt and looked forward to another prophet like Moses who would provide "manna" from heaven as Moses had done.
- Jesus went up on a mountainside to teach his disciples.
 - Jesus's custom was to sit and teach.
 - He may have gone up the mountain with the disciples to escape the crowd.
 - Scholars locate this event in the Golan Heights, on the northeastern shore of the Sea of Galilee.

The Problem: Hungry People (6:5-7).

- John succinctly reports that Jesus saw the crowds coming toward him (v 5). The Synoptics report that Jesus taught the crowds and healed their sick, actions John omits.
- Jesus asks Philip where they might buy bread for the people (v 6). Philip was a native of Bethsaida, a town located in this part of the country.
- Jesus's question was a test, since he already knew what he was going to do (v 6).
 - Testing can be either negative (like temptation) or positive in the Bible.
 - When it is positive, the idea is that God trusts we will come up with the right answer.
- Philip doesn't exactly pass the test, exclaiming that it would take more than half a year's wages to feed that many people – 200 denarii.
- Philip's answer betrays his lack of faithful imagination, but it does set up the extraordinary nature of the miracle soon to occur.

The Miracle: An Abundance of Food (6:8-13).

- Andrew, Peter's brother, who was also from Bethsaida (see 1:40-44), brings to Jesus a boy.
 - The boy has a small lunch – five small barley loaves and two small fish (v 9).

- Andrew voices what is obvious – this is an insignificant amount when compared to the need (v 9).
- Andrew’s attitude may indicate that he only brings the boy to Jesus because the boy himself had taken the initiative and wanted to offer what he had to Jesus.
- The incident echoes 2 Kings 4:42-44 in which twenty loaves of barley bread were brought to Elisha but were regarded by his servant as completely inadequate to feed one hundred men. Elisha had responded, “Give it to the people to eat. For this is what the Lord says: ‘They will eat and have some left over.’”
- The miracle is described in the simplest of ways. With just two verses, John explains that Jesus had the people sit down, then Jesus took the bread, then the fish, blessed them, and gave to the people so that people had as much as they wanted (vv 10-11).
 - The text highlights that there was plenty of grass in the area. This indicates that it was in the spring, which was also Passover time.
 - The disciples likely organized the mass of people into groups (see Mark 6:39-40).
 - The men numbered five thousand, but the total number probably numbered twice as many (see Matthew 14:21).
- Jesus’s blessing of the bread likely followed the traditional Jewish thanksgiving, “Blessed be thou, Yahweh our God, king of the world who causes bread to come forth from the earth.”
- The miracle is one of abundance.
 - The people all eat “as much as they wanted” (v 11).
 - After all had eaten all they wanted, Jesus instructs the disciples to gather up the rest lest it be wasted (v 12).
 - This is different from Moses and the manna. There, nothing could be gathered that was not eaten. Here, what is leftover, is preserved.
 - The leftovers total twelve full baskets and may indicate either the twelve tribes of Israel or the simple fact that twelve disciples were gathering up the leftovers.

The Conclusion: Jesus, the Messiah (6:14-15).

- Moses promised the people, “The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own brothers. You must listen to him” (Deuteronomy 18:15).
- The people conclude that Jesus must be this prophet (v 14).
- John adds that Jesus perceived that they were going to try to make him king by force (v 15).
 - Battles are won by bread as much as by bullets – a king who can keep his army well fed is well suited for victory.
 - Jesus hasn’t come to be a king like other kings. Therefore, he removes himself from the situation before they can force him to be their king.
- John wants people to believe that Jesus is the king (the Messiah), but also to understand just what kind of king he actually is.

Sources:

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