

The Feeding of the Five Thousand – *John 6:1-15*

Introduction – We come to the second of three Passovers mentioned by John (2:13, 11:55) and to the fourth of seven signs (2:1ff, 4:46ff, 5:1ff). The Jewish Passover was the great national celebration of Israel's deliverance from Egypt by the great prophet and leader, Moses. In this gospel, Jesus is declared to be the Lamb of God (1:29, 36) and Passover was that feast celebrating the angel of death "*passing over*" homes that had been marked with the blood of a sacrificial lamb. At the last Passover mentioned in John, Jesus was in Jerusalem, where He cleansed the temple and then declared that He would destroy the temple and raise it again in three days (2:13ff), all of which caused quite a stir, especially among the religious elite. This time He is far from Jerusalem, up around the sea of Galilee, where a great multitude is continually following Him (6:1-2). Throughout Chapter 6, watch for how much Jesus is replaying the life and signs of Moses (and remember 5:45-47). The miracle of feeding this huge gathering is stunning in itself, but remember, these signs are given to be understood in such a way as to grant and strengthen faith in Jesus as the Son of God (20:31). Let us consider the text with John's goal in mind.

Overview – It's about 6 months after the events of chapter 5 and Jesus heads east away from the Jewish portion of Galilee (v1). However, a great multitude was continually following Him because of the signs they had seen (v2). Jesus goes up a hill and sat with His disciples (v3). The time is near Passover and Jesus sees the great multitude coming toward Him (v4). He tests Philip, asking him how to feed this large crowd (vv5-6) and Philip replies that 8 months of wages would not begin to feed such a crowd (v7). Andrew brings a lad with five barley loaves and two small fish, but embarrassingly admits this is nothing (vv8-9). Jesus tells the disciples to make the people sit down on the grass on the hill and we are told there were about 5,000 (v10). Jesus took the loaves, gave thanks, and through the disciples, distributed the loaves and fish, and they were able to give to everyone as much as they wanted (v11). When they were filled, the disciples gathered up twelve baskets of fragments left over (13). Those who saw this declared "*This is truly the Prophet who is to come into the world*" (v14). And Jesus, perceiving that this crowd was about to come and take Him by force to make Him king, departed up into the mountain to be alone (v15).

The Promised Prophet – What this passage first teaches is that these events led the people to believe that a new Moses, even a greater Moses, was now among them (v14). Moses had promised that a prophet like him would come one day (Deut 18:15-18). And they were correct to believe so. After His resurrection, both Peter and Stephen would testify to this truth (Acts 3:22, 7:37). Jesus had led them along a sea and had gone up on a mountain, sitting with His disciples, presumably teaching them. The people had followed along but then realized they were without food. Like Moses in the wilderness, Jesus provided miraculous bread that fed them all. Later, Jesus would explain this in greater fashion (6:32-33), but here they saw it in the sign.

There is also a good shepherd sign here, which will be developed later in John as well. Jesus has the people sit down on the green grass (there was much there – v10) and feeds them like the good shepherd (Psalm 23). This is made even more clear in Matthew and Mark's account where Jesus is contrasted with Herod who at a feast has John the Baptist beheaded and served on a feast tray while Jesus feeds the multitude (Matt 14:1-21). A tyrant devours his people, and a true king feeds his people.

Moses was a Deliverer and a Provider, a good shepherd. But Jesus was greater. The manna provided daily needs. Jesus provided as much as they wanted with twelve baskets leftover. Why twelve? Was it to point out that Jesus provided all that was needed for all of Israel (the twelve tribes)? Was it to point out that the twelve disciples had all they needed from Jesus to serve His flock and more?

And what was the "test" that Jesus gave Philip (vv5-6)? Was it to teach the disciples (and all disciples) that He would provide to those who serve on His behalf all that they need? Or was it to test Philip in that moment as to who Philip really believed Jesus was? God never tempts us (James 1:13) but this same word is used, translated differently, because God does test us (John 6:6). Our faith is tested so that our faith may be perfected (James 1:2-4). Likewise, tribulations are the work of God to strengthen our hope through the loving work of the Holy Spirit through those trials (Rom 5:3-5). We learn to look straight on at troubles too big for us to solve, to face them while keeping our eyes fixed on the One who provides all things.

A Revolutionary Prophet – It's Passover, a greater and more hopeful celebration of an old deliverance with the anticipation of a greater deliverance. A huge multitude has gathered around this leader. In fact, there are 5000 men, one of the standard measures of a Roman legion. He is showing signs that He is a greater Moses. He is not rebuking them for not being in Jerusalem; He isn't even in Jerusalem. He has claimed He is the new temple and that means when you are with Him, you are with God. The Jewish revolutionaries would have loved seeing Jesus doing these things, challenging the elites of Jewish rule, and watching His following swell.

Make Him King! – We already learned that Jesus knew what was in the heart of man (2:23-25). They wanted to make Him king for their purposes. They wanted to follow Him for their ends. And they wanted to be the ones to *make* Him king. But we don't *make* Jesus King and Lord. And He doesn't become king according to our purposes and ends. He is not our genie in a bottle. The devil had tried to tempt Jesus with the promise to make Him king as well (Matt 4:8-9). But Jesus would not be made king on the devil's terms. He didn't intend to receive the kingdoms of this world from the devil. He intended to take the kingdoms of this world from the devil (Matt 12:28-29, 16:18, Rev 1:18). He didn't intend for His kingdom to triumph by beating His enemy in guerilla and siege warfare, but by dying and rising from the dead. He would not go to Jerusalem to wield the spear but to receive the spear thrust and bear the judgment. And that would be His triumph.

And He will not be king on your terms to get whatever you want out of life. You don't get to be king telling Jesus what to do. Jesus will not be king so you can get your way. He does not belong to you; you belong to Him. And when we try to use Him to promote our plan, our dream, our desires, He will withdraw. There are in fact times where His mission will look very different than yours. As His subjects, we are to conform ourselves to His will – and not the other way around (Matt 16:24).

Compassionate and Excessive Grace – At the same time we are to behold this Sovereign King in His compassion and excessive grace. He sees the need and overwhelmingly supplies (Phil 4:19). Jesus knew this of His Father and so He took one of the small barley loaves and gave thanks (John 6:11). We are warned that idolatry and unbelief follow the lack of giving thanks to God for all of His gifts (Rom 1:21). The gifts of God are so easy to take while forgetting the One who gives them. We consume the gift without thankful hearts and soon the gift becomes hollow, for we have forgotten the Giver. Our culture lives this way, more opulent and wealthy than ever in the history of mankind, yet empty and aching more than ever in loneliness, anxiety, fear, and despair. Ungrateful hearts are empty hearts and empty hearts are homes for devils.

Join with Jesus in giving thanks to the Father for the smallest gifts and watch Him multiply those gifts. Give thanks and live thankful lives for your eternal life in Jesus – and watch Him multiply your life with fruitfulness to His glory. For He is the great Deliverer, the great Savior, the great Shepherd, the great King. He is Jesus the Christ, the Son of God.

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