



The Gospel of John

Session Eleven: The Feeding of the 5,000 and Jesus Walks on Water

THE LESSON AT A GLANCE

This week's text covers two unique miracles of Jesus, performed on the same day—the feeding of the 5,000 and Jesus walking on water. These two demonstrations of who Jesus is (Provider and Protector) are bracketed by a short commentary on who Jesus is not—a prophet or a politician.

The feeding of the 5,000 is the only story outside Holy Week activities that is recorded in all four Gospels. (Matthew 14:13-21; Mark 6:30-44; Luke 9:10-17) Likewise, the account of Jesus walking on water is in three Gospels, including an important side note of Peter walking on water in the Matthew narrative. (Matthew 14:22-33; Mark 6:45-52) A study of these texts will be enriched by examining what each writer chose to highlight in their respective versions.

TODAY'S SCRIPTURES

John 6:1-21

THE MAIN IDEA

In feeding the multitudes and walking on water, Jesus demonstrated His provision and power over nature. He is our provider and protector, and the appropriate response to His activity is worship.

QUESTION TO EXPLORE

We do not come to Jesus on our terms, but on His. Are there times I am tempted to try and make Jesus who I want Him to be, or demand that He do what I want, rather than assume a posture of worship and trust?

SCRIPTURE IN CONTEXT

John 6:1-13 After a devastating loss and the return of the disciples from their first missionary journey, Jesus and the men went up to a mountain for rest. A large crowd followed them, and Jesus met their physical need for food in a miraculous way. We can trust Jesus to provide.

John 6:14-15 After the miracle of the bread and fish, the crowd began to think of other ways Jesus might be of some benefit to them. If He were a prophet, they could listen to Him or reject Him at will, or if they could make Him a political figure, He could possibly free them from Roman occupation. But we are not the ones to determine who Jesus is or what He should do.

John 6:16-21 At the end of an exhausting day, the disciples were sent away to cross the Sea of Galilee while Jesus remained behind to dismiss the crowds and pray. An unexpected storm arose in the night, and the disciples were afraid. Jesus came to them, walking on water, and calmed the storm. He is our protector and sustainer. We can trust Him to care for us.



START HERE

This week's text gives us a powerful picture of who Jesus is, and a discourse on who He is not. Through Jesus' provision, He is revealing something about who He is that the crowd misses. They see Him as either a healthcare provider or a militant ruler.

Read John 6:16-21 and Exodus 3:7-14 and consider who Scripture says He is. Which of these providers have you viewed Him to be, as you examine the way you relate to Him?

DISCUSS

Are there times that you are tempted to make Jesus your own personal genie in a bottle, waiting to do what you want Him to do and when you want Him to do it? Where do you think that false thinking comes from, and how does right theology protect us from it?

REVIEW AND DISCUSS THE TEXT

The All-Sufficient Provider: Jesus Meets Our Need Beyond Our Means

John 6:1-13: *After this, Jesus crossed the Sea of Galilee (or Tiberias). A huge crowd was following him because they saw the signs that he was performing by healing the sick. Jesus went up a mountain and sat down there with his disciples.*

Now the Passover, a Jewish festival, was near. So when Jesus looked up and noticed a huge crowd coming toward him, he asked Philip, "Where will we buy bread so that these people can eat?" He asked this to test him, for he himself knew what he was going to do.

Philip answered him, "Two hundred denarii worth of bread wouldn't be enough for each of them to have a little."

One of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, said to him, "There's a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish—but what are they for so many?"

Jesus said, "Have the people sit down."

There was plenty of grass in that place; so they sat down. The men numbered about five thousand. Then Jesus took the loaves, and after giving thanks he distributed them to those who were seated—so also with the fish, as much as they wanted.

When they were full, he told his disciples, "Collect the leftovers so that nothing is wasted." So they collected them and filled twelve baskets with the pieces from the five barley loaves that were left over by those who had eaten.

Unpacking John 6:1-13

In 2007, two young roommates living in San Francisco, Brian Chesky and Joe Gebbia, had an idea. A large design conference was taking place in their town, and all hotel rooms were booked. Struggling to make ends meet, they came up with a way to make a little cash by offering up three air mattresses in their downtown apartment, along with Wi-Fi and breakfast—



and Airbnb was born. Their company went on to revolutionize the travel industry. Individual homeowners could rent out a room or a whole house and could personalize the experience to meet their guests' needs. Today, Airbnb has over 8 million hosts and 275 million active users on their platform. What started as a way to earn a few extra bucks changed the hospitality industry forever, all because two guys recognized a need and found a creative way to meet it.

Part of what makes a vacation rental successful is the host's ability to anticipate the needs of guests. Coffee makers, emergency toiletries, extra paper products and an abundance of bath towels and scented soaps are all things that make guests feel at home. These accommodations allow guests to enjoy their vacation even more. In today's text, Jesus was able to anticipate the needs of a large crowd that followed Him and then He met those needs in an extraordinary way.

To best understand today's text—the only event prior to Holy Week recorded in all four Gospels (Matthew 14:13-21; Mark 6:30-44; Luke 9:10-17)—it's important to consider the context the other Gospel writers supply. The disciples had recently returned from their first missionary journey—going out in pairs to neighboring towns to preach repentance, drive out demons, and heal the sick (Mark 6:12-13). The apostles returned and reported to Jesus what happened (Luke 9:10). However, other news came to Jesus presumably at the same time. Matthew reports that right before their return, John the Baptist, Jesus's cousin, was beheaded at Herod's command (Matthew 14:12).

It's hard to imagine the emotional and spiritual pain Jesus experienced in that moment. Still, the crowds came, bringing to Jesus their own sorrows and sufferings, and He healed them and taught them. It would have been understandable for Jesus to send them away. After all, He and His disciples had their own sorrows and sufferings to process. Jesus is uniquely moved with compassion toward hurting people. The crowd likely grew all day and Matthew's account states He ministered to the people into the evening (Matthew 14:15).

Ministering to a large crowd with no preparation presented its own set of challenges. The day wore on, and no one had eaten. Imagine showing up for an all-day retreat only to discover that the planning committee forgot to order catering! Under normal circumstances, this would present a huge challenge, as Jesus's question to Philip implied. However, Jesus's question was for His disciples' benefit, not His own. Jesus already knew how He would meet the need, but this daunting circumstance gave Him opportunity to teach His disciples a lesson about trusting God to provide.

In response, Philip saw the problem and at once considered the abundance of human resources it would take to meet the need. He ran some quick numbers in His head, estimating that it would take nearly a year's wages to even give each person a bite of food. Andrew, however, considered the scarcity. Five loaves and two fish might have been enough for a small boy's lunch, but what impact could it possibly make?



Though they responded differently, both men looked at the problem through human eyes. Who has that much money? What could we possibly do with so little? We all face seasons of scarcity. When our paycheck won't seem to stretch until the end of the month, or there's less food, emotional energy, joy, or mental fortitude to keep putting one foot in front of the other, our temptation can be to look at the situation through human eyes. Our natural tendency is to focus on what we don't have, thinking, *"If I just had more money, time, resources, friends, job opportunities, then things would be ok."* Or we might focus on what we do have and give into despair, wondering with Andrew, *"What are they for so many?"* However, faith offers Jesus our scarcity and embraces His provision. Faith surrenders the meager offering and waits to see how Jesus will provide.

Jesus met their scarcity with His abundance. A small lunch, given in faith, became the tool Christ used to meet the great need. Just as God provided manna from heaven, Jesus could have provided out of thin air. He didn't need the boy's lunch in order to facilitate the miracle. However, there was more to this story than just a meal. Jesus was teaching His people to trust Him with what we *do* have, believing He can and will provide.

Following the miracle, the disciples were in charge of collecting the leftovers, a basketful for each one. Matthew's account says they were also responsible for distributing the meal (Matthew 14:19). Can you imagine what this experience must have been like? Each disciple started with half of a small loaf of bread and a tiny portion of fish, but as they gave it away, more appeared. Like the widow of Zarephath's oil and flour (1 Kings 17:14), the supply didn't run out until everyone had eaten *"as much as they wanted"* (John 6:11). The disciples, having just returned from their missionary journey, had a visual reminder that it is Christ who provides. Not only does He multiply our resources for His kingdom purposes, but He also multiplies the meager offering of our service to carry out His will.

"When they were full, he told his disciples, 'Collect the leftovers so that nothing is wasted.' So they collected them and filled twelve baskets with the pieces from the five barley loaves that were left over by those who had eaten" (John 6:12-13). Jesus didn't have the disciples sit to the side and observe. He allowed them to be a part of the miracle. He allowed them to see His providence up close. Before this chapter ends, Jesus will make His first *"I am"* claim— *"I am the bread of life"* (John 6:35). The disciples no doubt remembered this day when the Bread of Life provided bread from heaven. They would recall when Christ proclaimed, *"My flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink. The one who eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me, and I in him"* (John 6:55-56). And certainly, on the night He was arrested, they would remember this miracle of His provision— *"And he took bread, gave thanks, broke it, gave it to them, and said, 'This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.'"* (Luke 22:19) The Bread of Life, who fed the crowd with broken loaves, would go on to surrender His own body to be broken and offered up for us all.

Jesus anticipated the needs of the crowd and took action. Like any great host, He made sure everyone had enough. Jesus is our Provider. However, questions would arise as to why Jesus



performed the miracles He did, if He would repeat them, and the crowd's desire to use His power for their purposes.

DISCUSS

- *Can you think of a time a vacation homeowner, a hotel concierge, or another host went out of their way to make you feel welcome? What kind of lasting impression did that hospitality make?*
- *What strikes you about how Jesus worked in the feeding (see John 6:5-9, 11-13)? What role did the small offering (five loaves/two fish) play? How did this serve to magnify the work of Jesus?*
- *What "small thing" in your hands (time, money, skills, prayer, presence) might Jesus multiply if you offer it to Him? How does this shape your confidence in Jesus as your provider rather than in your own resources?*

2. The Misunderstood Messiah: When We Want Jesus on Our Terms

John 6:14-15: *When the people saw the sign he had done, they said, "This truly is the Prophet who is to come into the world."*

Therefore, when Jesus realized that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, he withdrew again to the mountain by himself.

Unpacking John 6:14-15

Imagine a review of a restaurant where the reviewer said, "The place looked great, the food was amazing, but I'm taking off a star because the chef didn't have *my* favorite dessert on the menu? Or a recipe review where the person substituted several ingredients, skipped half the steps, and then commented, "Tastes terrible and didn't come out like the picture—one star." These would both be a problem of unreasonable expectations.

It's interesting how we approach things from this mindset. We want our expectations not only to be met, but for others to anticipate what we want. The crowd who followed Jesus reacted in a similar way. They saw what He could do—heal the sick, give the blind sight, and feed a multitude—but they evaluated Him according to their own expectations. Would Jesus be a prophet to speak truth, a provider for all the free bread and fish they wanted, or would He lead a powerful rebellion to overthrow Roman rule? They missed who Jesus really is, because all they saw was who they wanted Him to be.

The crowd thought Jesus was a prophet who had come to speak for God. You might recall, the New Testament opens during a time that some scholars refer to as the "400 years of silence." Many people longed to hear God speak like He did for their ancestors. The Old Testament closed with the words of the minor prophet Malachi: "*See, I will send the prophet Elijah to you before that great and dreadful day of the Lord comes. He will turn the hearts of the parents to their children, and the hearts of the children to their parents; or else I will come and strike the*



land with total destruction” (Malachi 4:5). As Malachi contemplated the Messiah, the people hung their hope on a Savior who would punish evil and reunite the children of Israel. They, like many of us, were guilty of asking too little of the Lord—they wanted someone to speak for God and failed to recognize that God was sending them not just a messenger, but a Savior.

In the years that ensued, Israel experienced the deafening silence of God during the gestational period of the gospel. In the waiting, rabbinic traditions grew, synagogues (places to worship God outside of the temple) opened, and the Jewish leaders became intertwined with the political influence of Rome. Many waited for the promised Messiah, believing He would rescue them from political oppression and reestablish Israel and the military center of the Mesopotamian world.

“But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons.” (Galatians 4:4-5 ESV) God’s silence was His grace. “The fullness” of time allowed for the spread of Greek as a common language among the people of the empire—something that would have been essential for reaching the Gentiles. Rome famously constructed more than 50,000 miles of hard-surface roads stretching from Britain to Spain, to the Euphrates river system and into northern Africa. The fact that the gospel message spread so quickly throughout the Mediterranean world is due, in fact, to God’s sovereign restraint in sending Christ when He did. God’s timing is always right, and the gospel message broke the silence of heaven at just the right time in history.

Nevertheless, the crowd had their own ideas about who Jesus should be. This crowd wasn’t the first to think Jesus was a prophet. (You might recall the words of the Samaritan woman at the well in John 4:19: *“Sir, I perceive that you are a prophet.”*) However, Jesus perceived that others in the crowd saw Him as something more. *“Therefore, when Jesus realized that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, he withdrew again to the mountain by himself”* (John 4:15).

Jesus did not come as a prophet. The last “prophet” was John the Baptist, who came in the Spirit of Elijah to prepare people for Christ’s arrival (Malachi 4:5). And Jesus did not come as a politician. He refused to entertain discussion of political ambition. He did, however, come as a provider. On this day, Jesus met a very real and present need. While acknowledging Jesus as provider is right and proper, we can also face temptation to minimize Jesus to just a provider and look for what He can do more than we worship Him for who He is. We’ll see this dynamic in next week’s text when the hungry crowd hunted Jesus down a second time in search of a free meal (John 6:26).

What Jesus ultimately provides us is Himself. The Bread of heaven is worth more than earthly bread any day. Jesus wants to, and often does, meet our physical needs in tangible and practical ways. In Matthew 7:9-11, Jesus said, *“Who among you, if his son asks him for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a snake? If you then, who are*



evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask him.” Jesus is a faithful provider for His people.

Where we must exercise caution, however, is taking the same position as the hungry lunch crowd—looking for what Jesus can give, rather than worshiping Him for who He is. Jesus is our great reward. Knowing Him is our prize. Kneeling before Him is our highest political ambition and following Him is our privilege.

DISCUSS

- *Think of a time when someone disappointed you, not because they had done anything wrong, but because you had unspoken expectations. What did that experience teach you about communication? What has God communicated we should expect of Jesus?*
- What do the crowd’s words in John 6:14 (“This truly is the Prophet . . .”) and their intent (v. 15) tell you about their view of Jesus? How did Jesus respond (or not respond) to that expectation?
- Where might you be trying to fit Jesus into your mold (provider, counselor, political deliverer, comforter, etc.) rather than letting Him define Himself? How can you open yourself to who He *is*, rather than who you *want Him to be*?

3. The Sovereign Savior: Worship in the Storm

John 6:16-21: When evening came, his disciples went down to the sea, got into a boat, and started across the sea to Capernaum. Darkness had already set in, but Jesus had not yet come to them. A high wind arose, and the sea began to churn. After they had rowed about three or four miles, they saw Jesus walking on the sea. He was coming near the boat, and they were afraid. But he said to them, “It is I. Don’t be afraid.” Then they were willing to take him on board, and at once the boat was at the shore where they were heading.

Unpacking John 6:16-21

Hotels on coastal properties have a unique responsibility to care for their guests during inclement weather. From protocols for closing beaches during storms to keeping a hotel full of people safe (and fed!) during a hurricane, beach-front properties must prepare for a wide variety of weather-related challenges.

After the events in John 6, the disciples finally had opportunity to withdraw from the crowds. Three of the four Gospel writers included an account of what happened next (Matthew 14:22-33; Mark 6:45-52) It might be helpful to read all three accounts for a richer understanding of the text. After the multiplication of the loaves and fish, it’s not hard to imagine a fair amount of excitement and chaos was present. Jesus dismissed the disciples to head across the sea to Capernaum, while He stayed behind to dismiss the crowd, and then withdrew to a mountain to



pray (Matthew 14:23). Jesus no doubt understood that each time He performed a public miracle, it brought Him under the scrutiny of the religious leaders and ultimately closer to the cross. How could He possibly expect 5,000 or more people to not talk about what happened that day? So, He withdrew to a mountain to pray while the disciples started the nearly eight-mile journey to cross the Sea of Galilee.

The Sea of Galilee, a freshwater lake, is surrounded by the mountainous areas of the Galilee and the Decapolis. As winds wrap around the eastern mountains, they drop into the low-level lake, making it subject to unexpected and violent storms. On this night, as the disciples made their way across the lake, a fierce storm erupted. The Mark narrative gives added details: *“Well into the night, the boat was in the middle of the sea, and he was alone on the land. He saw them straining at the oars, because the wind was against them. Very early in the morning he came toward them walking on the sea and wanted to pass by them”* (Mark 6:47-48). John’s account says they were roughly halfway across, buffeted by waves, likely blown off course, and still several miles from the safety of the shore.

Mark’s account records that early in the morning, after the disciples had struggled for many hours in the night, Jesus approached them, walking on the water. In the dark, the exhausted men saw someone walking on the water and were reasonably terrified. *“But he said to them, ‘It is I. Don’t be afraid’”* (John 6:20). After this, the men invited Jesus on board, and they immediately made it to the other side.

Matthew included another scene in these events that the others left out—Peter walking on water. It’s important to keep in mind that each Gospel writer approached telling the story of Jesus from a variety of perspectives and motivations. In Matthew’s account, the focus was on Peter’s doubt turned to faith, and the declaration by the disciples, *“Truly you are the Son of God”* (Matthew 14:33). John emphasized the different roles that Jesus demonstrated in this two-part story: In the feeding of the 5,000, Jesus demonstrated He is provider, and in this story, He is powerful protector. In between the two vignettes, John addressed the things the people wanted Him to be—a powerful political figure, another prophet they could ignore, or an endless supply of free food. John reminds us we come to Jesus on His terms, not ours.

In our own walk of faith, we rarely get to see the big picture. We will face times when our need surpasses our supply. We will face times of unexpected darkness and storms. When those days come, it is important that our understanding of who Jesus is remains steadfast. He alone is our faithful provider and our sovereign and powerful protector. When we recognize Jesus for who He is, then we, like the disciples, respond in worship: *“Truly you are the Son of God”* (Matthew 14:33).



DISCUSS

- *When life feels like you're rowing hard and getting nowhere—what do you tend to look for: an easier boat? a calmer sea? an assurance that someone powerful will come to intervene?*
- *What does Jesus's response ("It is I; don't be afraid", v. 20) show us about Jesus's presence and the disciples' condition? What is the significance of verse 21 ("Then they were willing to take him on board...")?*
- *How does recognizing Jesus' presence change how you respond when you're "in the boat" (life's troubles, fears, unmet needs)? What step of trust or worship might you take this week?*

DEEPER FOCUS

REFLECT ON THE TEXT

DISCUSS

- *If Jesus is more than provider or political savior—He is Savior and Lord—how does that change the way I relate to Him, both in times of plenty and times of storm?*
- *What will I choose to worship Jesus for (rather than merely use Him for)?*

RESPOND TO THE TEXT

What are some signs that I'm trying to make Jesus who I want Him to be, rather than worshiping Him for who He is? How might my prayers look different from each of those perspectives?

APPLY

How might our group live differently if we embraced Jesus's full identity—both meeting needs and sovereign over chaos—rather than simply expecting Him to fix our immediate problems?

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