

## *True Bread from Heaven*

A sermon preached by Dr. John Clayton at Covenant Presbyterian Church of Fort Smith, Arkansas on September 29, 2019.

*Now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there in a boat to a desolate place by himself. But when the crowds heard it, they followed him on foot from the towns. When he went ashore he saw a great crowd, and he had compassion on them and healed their sick. Now when it was evening, the disciples came to him and said, "This is a desolate place, and the day is now over; send the crowds away to go into the villages and buy food for themselves." But Jesus said, "They need not go away; you give them something to eat." They said to him, "We have only five loaves here and two fish." And he said, "Bring them here to me." Then he ordered the crowds to sit down on the grass, and taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven and said a blessing. Then he broke the loaves and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds. And they all ate and were satisfied. And they took up twelve baskets full of the broken pieces left over. And those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children (Matthew 14:13–21).*

We pray the Lord's Prayer (from Matthew 6:9-13) every Sunday. Within that prayer we ask God, "Give us this day our daily bread," understood to be a petition for the food we need. Why? Why do we ask God for something that we have seemingly in abundance. In a country where obesity is an epidemic, how much more bread do we need? Should we change the prayer to: "Give us the discipline not to eat so much bread daily?"

What about those who do not pray for their daily bread? Do they not have food to eat? Is such a petition a human requirement for daily bread? Then do we repeat the words of our Lord in vain? Should we hold off on that prayer until a real need exists? Or, could it be that as we pray for our daily bread that we are praying something more?

To pray for our daily bread is indeed a fitting petition for us all to pray. We all need food daily, and it is ultimately God who gives it. The beautiful simplicity of the Lord's prayer leads us to pray to the God who gives us daily bread by the means of his providence. But such a petition also reveals dependence, something we may be reluctant to admit. We are dependent upon God's provision of all things, great and small. And in the basic of our necessities, food, our Lord teaches us to pray to our heavenly Father for it.

God demonstrated this reality to Israel as He led them out of Egyptian captivity and to the Promised Land. While slaves to Pharaoh, the children of Israel did not lack for food in Egypt. But in the wilderness they became hungry crying out to Moses and Aaron, "Would that we had died by the hand of the LORD in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the meat pots and ate bread to the full, for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger" (Ex. 16:3). In that moment they preferred slavery and full over freedom and hungry.

Revealing the lack of dependence upon their heavenly Father, Israel chose to grumble rather than pray for provision. Yet, God in His mercy provided, covering the camp with

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quail for meat and bread from heaven, and so Israel ate and were full. The Lord provided meat and bread meeting the practical need of His hungry people, but the Lord's provision had greater significance. In His miraculous provision, the Lord declared to Israel, "Then you shall know that I am the LORD your God" (Ex. 16:12).

In similar fashion, children of Israel followed the Lord Jesus into "a desolate place." They had nothing to eat as the day came to an end. Concerned for the welfare of the people, Jesus' disciples ask him to "send the crowds away to go into the villages and buy food for themselves." This is good, practical advice...unless there is a purpose of greater significance in their situation. What if the purpose of their hunger is to show their dependence upon the Lord's provision? And what if, like Israel in the wilderness, the Lord Jesus' miraculous provision declares, "Then you shall know that I am the LORD your God"?

### **Delivery from Heaven**

The disciples state the objective truth: As the day ends the people need to eat. As the people are in a desolate place, there is nothing to eat. As the people are following Jesus, he needs to send them into the villages to eat. There is nothing wrong with the disciples' observation and counsel. But Jesus uses the opportunity to not only provide the practical but to reveal his glory. So, he says to them bluntly, "They need not go away; you give them something to eat." In the moment Jesus' words sound unreasonable and unrealistic.

The disciples respond again with the objective truth: "We have only five loaves here and two fish," clearly not enough food to feed the crowds. What has Jesus done in this moment? He has placed his disciples and the people in a position of vulnerability and dependence. The disciples cannot provide food for the people, and without food the people will go hungry. And this is precisely how God works: He provides a practical, perfect and praiseworthy provision for the good of his people and for His glory. Jesus provides practically for the hungry people with a miraculous provision. Directing the crowds to be grouped and seated, he takes the five loaves and the two fish, looks to heaven, prays a blessing, and distributes the food. This is not metaphorical language; they did not figuratively eat. Every hungry man, woman, and child eats to the full.

In Jesus' practical provision, let us remember that he provides for our practical needs as well. We pray for our daily bread because we need food daily. You and I have practical needs, needs for which we are told to pray. Let us not be reluctant to petition the Lord for them. James reminds us, "You do not have, because you do not ask" (James 4:2).

Not only does Jesus provide for the practical need of the people, but his provision is perfect. According to Matthew, "about five thousand men, besides women and children" are fed, and not only fed but "satisfied." Such is the perfect provision of the Lord, yet we often fret as if his provision is less than perfect, don't we? As if, somehow God's provision is not satisfying. Jesus said, "do not be anxious, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?'" For the Gentiles seek after all these

things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all” (Matt. 6:31-32). Our Lord’s provision is perfect.

So, our Lord’s provision is practical, perfect, and it is praiseworthy. Jesus feeds over five thousand people not as a publicity stunt but to reveal himself in his praiseworthy provision. What Jesus asks of his disciples is intentional: They cannot feed the crowd with five loaves and two fish. But Jesus can. Just as God provided for the children of Israel with quail and manna, that they would know the Lord their God, so Jesus multiplies the fish and bread that they would know the Lord Jesus is God. And in revealing himself in this miraculous delivery from heaven, he also reveals our dependence upon heaven.

### **Dependence upon Heaven**

When Jesus’ disciples state the objective truth of the crowds’ need for food, they also bring a proposed solution: “send the crowds away to go into the villages and buy food for themselves.” This is an excellent display of problem solving on the part of the disciples and personal responsibility on the part of the crowd. As a former boss used to tell me, “Don’t bring me a problem, John, without a solution.” I was to be a problem-solver, whether my solution was right or not. The disciples are exercising their management skills prudently.

Jesus has other plans. He says, “They need not go away,” and then demands, “you give them something to eat.” The problem is presented with a logical solution. Jesus rejects their solution with a bigger problem. The disciples’ solution? “We have only five loaves here and two fish.” Not a good solution...unless the practical provision isn’t the point. And, it isn’t.

Jesus puts his disciples and the crowd in a position of complete dependence upon him, for his glory and their good. Jesus taught his disciples, and through them us saying, “I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing” (John 15:5). And yet, more often than not we think we can. That is, until a problem exceeds our ability; until the trial overwhelms us; until the temptation is too great; until all hope is seemingly lost, and we confess: apart from you I can do nothing.

Contrary to the ways of the world, the spiritual reality is that God wants us dependent, for our good and his glory. Because God is God, his chief end is to glorify *himself* and enjoy *himself* forever. Because we are not God and he is, our chief end is to glorify God and enjoy him forever. Dependence achieves both: God is glorified in us when we are dependent upon him.

Are you weary of trying to live the Christian life as if you are the vine? Has God brought you to a point in life where He has revealed to you your dependence upon him? Have you interpreted it a problem when it may actually be God’s grace to you? On that day, in that desolate place, when over five thousand people were miraculously fed on two fish and

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five loaves, with twelve baskets of leftovers, every man, woman, and child was dependent upon Jesus, and they were satisfied, and he was glorified. God is glorified in us when we are dependent upon him, and in his provision he reveals his glory.

### **Declaration from Heaven**

At Jesus' baptism, "a voice from heaven said, 'This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased'" (Matt. 3:17). Such a declaration from heaven overtly revealed Jesus' identity as the Son of God, but this is not the only declaration from heaven revealing Jesus' identity. Jesus' miracles also serve as declarations from heaven.

In reading the bible some erroneously assume that miracles were common, everyday occurrences. In reality, the miracles of the Old Testament, for example, occurred primarily through the ministry of Moses and later Elijah and Elisha. Such miracles were not magician tricks for entertainment but declarations from heaven validating the prophet and his word. Therefore, we should consider Jesus' miracles as declarations from heaven validating his identity and word.

Consider the miracle of feeding the five thousand. As we witness the miraculous delivery from heaven and the dependence upon heaven, what is the miracle declaring? First, just as the crowds, like lost sheep, hungered in a desolate place, "All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—everyone—to his own way" (Isa. 53:6). In fact, like the church in Laodicea, we are "wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked" (Rev. 3:17). We cannot, indeed we will not, find the spiritual food we need. In our fallen depravity, we are utterly dependent upon the Lord's provision.

Second, just as Jesus fed the crowds with two fish and five loaves, miraculously multiplied to satisfy many, so Jesus testified, "I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst" (John 6:35). As the true bread from heaven, Jesus' substitutionary death atoned for the sin of many, and we receive such saving food by God's grace alone through faith in Christ alone. The hungry soul is only satisfied in the perfect and praiseworthy provision of the cross. While the crowds satisfied with food would be hungry the next day, those satisfied savingly in Christ are satisfied eternally.

For, Christ declared, "I am the living bread that comes down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. And the bread that I will give for life of the world is my flesh" (John 6:51). The true bread of heaven came to earth and lived a perfectly righteous life, died a sacrificial death, and arose from death conquering sin. Having perfectly accomplished his work, he ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father. As the eternal bread of life he gives life by his spirit: "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life (John 3:16).

Such is the declaration of the true bread of heaven in whom we are saved through whom we rejoice for whom we live. Amen.