

24 Mark 6:30-44 Jesus Feeds the Five Thousand

Discussion: Have you ever had a quite simple meal that turned out to be more satisfying than even one from the highest quality restaurant?

Mark 6	Matthew 14	Luke 9
<p>Jesus Feeds the Five Thousand 30 The apostles gathered around Jesus and reported to him all they had done and taught. 31 Then, because so many people were coming and going that they did not even have a chance to eat, he said to them, "Come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest." 32 So they went away by themselves in a boat to a solitary place.</p>	<p>Jesus Feeds the Five Thousand 13 When Jesus heard what had happened, he withdrew by boat privately to a solitary place</p>	<p>Jesus Feeds the Five Thousand 10 When the apostles returned, they reported to Jesus what they had done. Then he took them with him and they withdrew by themselves to a town called Bethsaida,</p>
<p>33 But many who saw them leaving recognized them and ran on foot from all the towns and got there ahead of them.</p>	<p>Hearing of this, the crowds followed him on foot from the towns.</p>	<p>11 but the crowds learned about it and followed him.</p>
<p>34 When Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd. So he began teaching them many things.</p>	<p>14 When Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, he had compassion on them and healed their sick.</p>	<p>He welcomed them and spoke to them about the kingdom of God, and healed those who needed healing.</p>

Comparison

- Mark and Luke again refer to the disciples as *apostles* (i.e., "one who is sent").
- In all three Synoptic Gospels, the account of the *feeding of the five thousand* is placed immediately following the death of John the Baptist. However, only Mark and Luke insert the return of the disciples at this point, completing the sandwich structure of:
 - a) the disciples are sent out in Mark 6:6-13,
 - b) the death of John in 6:14-29, and
 - c) the disciples return from their mission in Mark 6:30. Matthew instead locates their sending and return much earlier (Matt. 10) to support a larger section of teaching about what to expect *during* their mission when sent out.

Bible Study of Mark's Gospel

- As a consequence, Matthew's reason for Jesus wishing to withdraw appears to be in response to the news of John's death and the disciples are not mentioned. Mark and Luke instead suggest that the recently returned disciples needed time to recuperate after their mission. They had not even had time to eat before being surrounded by crowds whose hope was to receive or witness further miracles and healings.
- Jesus asked them to "Come away with me by yourselves". It reminds us that being a disciple is not only about *doing* mission, but primarily about *being with* Jesus.⁵⁹

Discussion: Jesus emphasised the need to "get away from it all" and rest after their mission. How do we "make space" for spending time with God in our own lives?

- Luke adds that their destination was the town of Bethsaida, about two miles around the coast from Capernaum, just over the border, outside Galilee. This allows us to imagine how the crowds could have followed, tracking the boat from the land, as it would not have needed to sail far offshore. The boat was headed towards a *lonely* or *desolate* place.⁶⁰
- Both Mark and Matthew describe Jesus' response to the crowds as one of *compassion*, while Luke speaks of Jesus *welcoming* them as he disembarked.

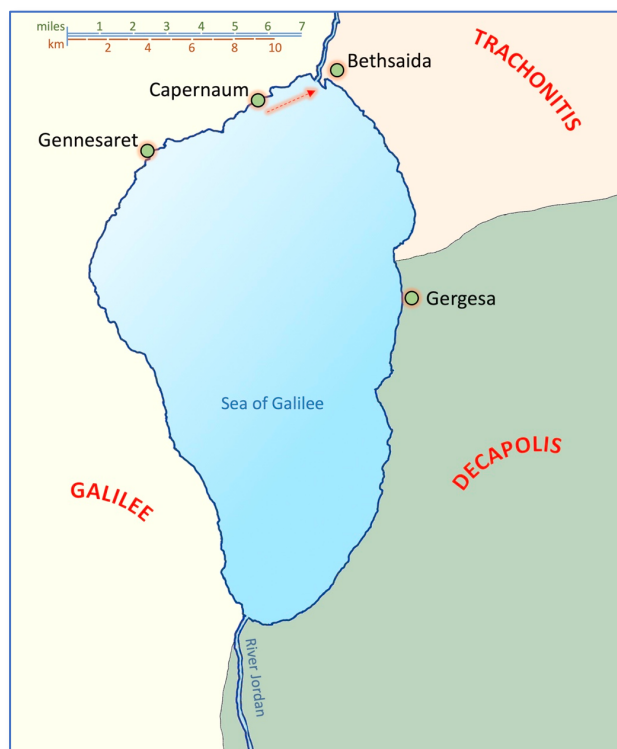


Figure 29: Galilee and Bethsaida

Context

- Mark adds that the reason for Jesus' concern is that they are a people without a leader. This recalls numerous OT allusions to Israel's need for a shepherd to lead them and God's promise that one day he would provide that shepherd (Ez. 34:1-31).⁶¹ Moses and David had previously led God's people in the distant past but there was no one of that type leading them now. They were a nation adrift.⁶²

Key Points

- In Jewish literature, *feeding* is often associated with being taught from the Torah.⁶³ Jesus' response of compassion is to *teach* them. He first fed the spiritual needs of his hearers, but in the following verses, he would meet their physical hunger with food.

Mark 6	Matthew 14	Luke 9
<p>35 By this time it was late in the day, so his disciples came to him. "This is a remote place," they said, "and it's already very late. 36 Send the people away so that they can go to the surrounding countryside and villages and buy themselves something to eat.</p>	<p>15 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."</p>	<p>12 Late in the afternoon the Twelve came to him and said, "Send the crowd away so they can go to the surrounding villages and countryside and find food and lodging, because we are in a remote place here."</p>
<p>37 But he answered, "You give them something to eat." They said to him, "That would take more than half a year's wages! Are we to go and spend that much on bread and give it to them to eat?"</p> <p>38 "How many loaves do you have?" he asked. "Go and see." When they found out, they said, "Five—and two fish."</p>	<p>17 "We have here only five loaves of bread and two fish," they answered. 18 "Bring them here to me," he said.</p>	<p>13 He replied, "You give them something to eat."</p> <p>They answered, "We have only five loaves of bread and two fish—unless we go and buy food for all this crowd." 14 (About five thousand men were there.)</p>
<p>39 Then Jesus directed them to have all the people sit down in groups on the green grass. 40 So they sat down in groups of hundreds and fifties. 41 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 his disciples to distribute to the people. He also divided the two fish among them all.</p>	<p>19 And he directed the people to sit down on the grass. 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.</p>	<p>But he said to his disciples, "Have them sit down in groups of about fifty each." 15 The disciples did so, and everyone sat down. 16 Taking the five loaves and the two fish and looking up to heaven, he gave thanks and broke them. Then he gave them to the disciples to distribute to the people.</p>
<p>42 They all ate and were satisfied, 43 and the disciples picked up twelve basketfuls of broken pieces of bread and fish. 44 The number of the men who had eaten was five thousand.</p>	<p>20 They all ate and were satisfied, and the disciples picked up twelve basketfuls of broken pieces that were left over. 21 The number of those who ate was about five thousand men, besides women and children.</p>	<p>17 They all ate and were satisfied, and the disciples picked up twelve basketfuls of broken pieces that were left over.</p>

Comparison

- The Greek phrase for the “late hour” means towards the end of the afternoon, when the Jews would typically have had the main meal of the day.⁶⁴
- The request by the disciples for Jesus to send the people away (and even find lodgings in Luke) was surely a reasonable one, highlighting the remoteness of their location.⁶⁵
- In Mark and Luke, Jesus insisted that *the disciples* should feed the people. Their first thought was that this would cost a lot of money! We also note the language moved from *apostles* (which is a role) back to *disciples* (which is a state of being, e.g., a follower).⁶⁶
- All three Synoptics agree, with only minor differences, that
 - the people were directed to gather in groups and sit on the grass,
 - there were five loaves and two fish,
 - Jesus gave thanks and then broke the loaves,
 - the disciples were responsible for distributing the food,
 - there were 5000 men present, not counting any women and children,
 - all were satisfied and yet twelve baskets of leftovers remained.

Context

- We read in the previous verse of Herod's banquet, dominated by the hatred of Herodias for John (which resulted in his death).⁶⁷ Now we witness a *holy* feast, where God's care and provision became the focus.⁶⁸ It recalls the provision of manna to the Israelites while they were in the desert (Exod.16).⁶⁹ Perhaps this is a foretaste of God's provision of a messianic banquet, both in the blood and wine of the Eucharist or Holy Communion for followers of Jesus and then later at the banquet in heaven (Rev 19:7-9).
- Jesus said to the disciples “You feed them!”. They had just returned from a mission for which Jesus had conferred upon them his *exousia* (divine authority), requiring them to teach, heal sicknesses, and cast out demons in the same way Jesus had been doing. However, this event was a miraculous power on a different level altogether.⁷⁰

Key Points

- The disciples assumed that they were expected to purchase sufficient food from their own funds, not having had a chance to eat or rest for themselves.

Bible Study of Mark's Gospel

- And yet Jesus asked how much food they had. The disciples had complained about what they lacked while Jesus focused on what they possessed. We recall the *Parable of the Mustard Seed* and how a mighty harvest can grow from the tiniest of resources. Everything now depended upon Jesus, so the disciples followed his instructions.⁷¹
- Arranging people into groups recalls how Moses arranged the Israelites into groups under their respective leaders (Exod. 18:25, Num. 31:14), feeding them in the wilderness (Num. 11:13, 22).
- There was no doubt as to the scale of the miracle. All the people were full and satisfied so this was no token meal.⁷² The baskets used to collect uneaten food were large and heavy (and were probably containers used in the boat for a catch of fish). Twelve baskets of leftovers remained, far exceeding the original quantity of loaves and fish they started with. A bounty, one for each disciple, who can eat and perhaps rest at last?

The Gospel of John

This is the first miracle reported in the Synoptics that also appears in John's Gospel.

John 6
<p><i>Jesus Feeds the Five Thousand</i></p> <p>1 Some time after this, Jesus crossed to the far shore of the Sea of Galilee (that is, the Sea of Tiberias), 2 and a great crowd of people followed him because they saw the signs he had performed by healing the sick. 3 Then Jesus went up on a mountainside and sat down with his disciples. 4 The Jewish Passover Festival was near. 5 When Jesus looked up and saw a great crowd coming toward him, he said to Philip, "Where shall we buy bread for these people to eat?" 6 He asked this only to test him, for he already had in mind what he was going to do. 7 Philip answered him, "It would take more than half a year's wages to buy enough bread for each one to have a bite!" 8 Another of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, spoke up, 9 "Here is a boy with five small barley loaves and two small fish, but how far will they go among so many?"</p>
<p>10 Jesus said, "Have the people sit down." There was plenty of grass in that place, and they sat down (about five thousand men were there). 11 Jesus then took the loaves, gave thanks, and distributed to those who were seated as much as they wanted. He did the same with the fish. 12 When they had all had enough to eat, he said to his disciples, "Gather the pieces that are left over. Let nothing be wasted." 13 So they gathered them and filled twelve baskets with the pieces of the five barley loaves left over by those who had eaten. 14 After the people saw the sign Jesus performed, they began to say, "Surely this is the Prophet who is to come into the world."</p>
<p>15 Jesus, knowing that they intended to come and make him king by force, withdrew again to a mountain by himself.</p>

Key Points

- There are many similarities in the details offered in John's account of this miracle. Minor differences are that some of the dialogue is attributed to specific disciples, plus the Roman name for Lake Galilee is given. Also, it was near the time of Passover (note the presence of green grass in the Synoptics which concurs with the season of Spring). However, the key elements are identical.
- One aspect observed by commentators is the focus on 5000 men as this area was a stronghold of the Zealot movement. There is a suggestion of a revolutionary uprising while the phrase "sheep without a shepherd" could imply a militaristic image.⁷³ This is not a picture with pastoral overtones for a weak and helpless people, but points to the lack of a strong leader like Moses, or his successor Joshua (Is. 63:11).⁷⁴ This continues the theme of Mark's Gospel where the question being asked about Jesus is "Who is this man?" and in the previous session more explicitly "Who he is *not*" (that is, not a reincarnated John the Baptist, not Elijah, nor one of the other Prophets of old). The Synoptics and John's Gospel further highlight who he is *not*, specifically *not a military* leader (like Barabbas, perhaps). John's Gospel makes clear those hopes and expectations of many within the crowd of men such that Jesus needed to withdraw.

Discussion: Who are you in this story? Can you relate to any of them? Perhaps you can see yourself as...

- one of the disciples, overly tired, with nothing left to give? And yet you become a provider, further depending upon God.
- one of the crowd being fed and receiving with joy?
- the one who went looking for what provision could be found?
- or, the boy in John's Gospel who unknowingly held such an important resource?

Have you noticed how, even when the disciples were utterly tired, possibly at the end of their tether, God calls them anyway to a further task of servanthood, and blesses it abundantly? Can you relate to this?