

LESSON #10 CHAPTER 6:1-21
The Miracle of Five Loaves and Two Fish

Divine Attribute: Abundant grace

Theological concept: Jesus is the Promised End Time Prophet

Geographical location: Sea of Galilee, Bethsaida, Capernaum

Chapter Structure

6:1-13 Jesus fed five thousand with five loaves and two fish

6:14-21 Jesus walked on the sea

Spiritual Principles:

P1 Grace multiplies when we extend it to others

Today's lesson...

In the last chapter, we read about Jesus healing a paralytic at Bethesda in Jerusalem on the Sabbath, which attracted the attention of those around the pool and the wrath of the religious authorities. Today, we will read about a significant miracle Jesus performed for over 10,000 people. The crowd recognised him as the great prophet of the end times foretold by Moses.

In between chapter 5 and chapter 6, many things happened. Such as the sermon on the mount (Mat 5-7) and the teaching of parables of the Kingdom of God (Mat 13). You may read more of them in Luke 6:1 – 9:10 and Mark 3:1-6:30.

The miracle of the five loaves and two fish was recorded in all four gospel books. However, there are rarely common words or phrases between narratives in the gospel of John and the synoptic gospels when describing this miracle, except for certain basic words without which it is impossible to describe the incident, such as “five thousand,” “five loaves,” “two fish,” “basket,” ...etc. So, let us pay attention to the message John was trying to convey to us.

A. 6:1-13 Jesus fed five thousand with five loaves and two fish

1After this Jesus went away to the other side of the Sea of Galilee, which is the Sea of Tiberias. 2And a large crowd was following him, because they saw the signs that he was doing on the sick. 3Jesus went up on the mountain, and there he sat down with his disciples. 4Now the Passover, the feast of the Jews, was at hand. 5 Lifting up his eyes, then, and seeing that a large crowd was coming toward him, Jesus said to Philip, “Where are we to buy bread, so that these people may eat?” 6He said this to test him, for he himself knew what he would do.

The Gospel of Mark (chapter 6) gave us a more detailed historical context for this miracle. Jesus sent twelve disciples to preach the gospel, giving them the power to drive out demons and heal the sick. The disciples returned and gave the Lord Jesus a report of their trip. At that time, there were so many people following the disciples that they didn't even have time to eat, *“they had no leisure even to eat.”* (Mk 6:30, 31) Jesus took the disciples from the west coast of the Sea of Galilee to Bethsaida of Julius in the Golan highland to let them rest (Lk 9:10). (We must not confuse this Bethsaida from the one in Galilee, where Peter, Andrew, and Philip lived.) However, the people persisted, and they were ahead of the disciples

when they arrived after running. When Jesus saw them, he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd. And he taught them many things until sunset. (Mk 6:33-36)

(The Sea of Galilee is also called the Sea of Tiberias. Tiberias was a spa city built by Herod Antipas, who was the Herod that beheaded John the Baptist and was involved in the Lord Jesus' trial. He named the spa city Tiberias in honour of the Roman Emperor Tiberius Julius Caesar Augustus, who reigned from AD 14 until 37. Since Roman times, it has been a well-known striving recreation spa for tourists. It was built around 17 natural mineral hot springs over 600 feet below sea level.

“Jesus went up on the mountain”^(6:3) refers to the Golan high ground on the east coast of the sea. In the Gospel of John, three Passover are mentioned. Jesus celebrated the first and the third Passover in Jerusalem. But he was in Galilee during the second Passover^(v.4). The apostle John referred to the Passover here so that we may know the time of the year when this miracle occurred. According to Prof F.F. Bruce, it is likely that the apostle John saw the spiritual connection between the Passover and both the miracle and the subsequent discourse that arose out of it, i.e. *“whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life”*^(6:54).

This miracle was recorded in Matthew chapter 14, Mark chapter 6 and Luke chapter 9. Jesus was concerned about dinner because the multitude had sat through a whole day of intensive training with Jesus. Whoever thinks that a spiritually minded man need not attend to physical needs is to rethink their attitude.

7 Philip answered him, “Two hundred denarii worth of bread would not be enough for each of them to get a little.” 8 One of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter’s brother, said to him, 9 “There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish, but what are they for so many?”

It was getting dark (Mat 14:15, Mk 6:35, Luke 9:12). The disciples urged Jesus to dismiss the people so that they might find their own lodging and food from the villages nearby (Mt 14:15, Mk 6:36). Instead, Jesus asked the disciples to provide for the multitude. He specifically posted the question to Philip, *“Where are we to buy bread, so that these people may eat?”*^(v.5)

At that time, one denarius was equivalent to a day's wage—enough to cover a family's meal for a day. Philip quickly concluded from a mental calculation that "two hundred denarii" was far from meeting the immediate need, and the disciples realized they were facing a huge challenge. Then Andrew found a boy who had five loaves and two small fish. He brought the boy to Jesus.

10 Jesus said, “Have the people sit down.” Now there was much grass in the place. So the men sat down, about five thousand in number.

Among the multitude, five thousand were *‘men’* (*andres* in Greek). (If we include the women and children in the counting, the number would be more than ten thousand.) Five thousand men can easily form a guerrilla; thus, we can understand the compulsion to make Jesus king after they saw the majestic miracle.

Mark and Luke recorded that Jesus instructed them to reorganise the multitude into groups of fifty and one hundred. This gave them information on the number of people and a system for distributing food in an orderly and prompt manner.

11 Jesus then took the loaves, and when he had given thanks, he distributed them to those who were seated. So also the fish, as much as they wanted. 12 And when they had eaten their fill...

Let us take note of two things here. First, John used the word *eucharisteó* (Greek) from which the theological term for the Lord's Supper "Eucharist" came. It means thanksgiving rendered to God for His good and beautiful grace. The synoptic gospel writers and Paul used the same word to represent the thanksgiving of the cup in the institution of the Lord's Supper. *"that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread, 24 and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said, "This is my body, which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me." (1Cor 11:23-24)*

Second, the synoptic gospels said, *"Then he broke the loaves and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds."* We cannot be sure at which point the multiplication of the bread and fish took place. Was it at the hands of the Lord, or the disciples, or the people? But we can be sure that the bread and fish multiplied continuously, feeding everyone present!

Life Application

1. Andrew could not fathom how the five loaves and the two small fish could be helpful, yet he brought them to the Lord. This is the faith of Andrew. We should begin by humbly offering what we have, no matter how small, to the Lord. If the Lord is pleased with us, He will take what we have and make it complete. This is how we can bring glory to God and receive His glory.
2. Jesus, as God, can make something out of nothing. He could have fed the multitude by turning stones into bread. Yet He chose to use a boy's humble meal. Dear brothers and sisters, God tells us He is willing to work with us. He is unconcerned with how little we can provide. As long as we scrap out all we have with all our hearts, He will be pleased to take us as His partners in His work. Hence, do not hesitate to take advantage of any chance to serve God!

Reflection: 1. What steps can I take in my habits to reduce food, water, paper, and plastic waste? 2. Do I value my time, talents, possessions, work, family, friendships, church, brotherhood, and life in Christ?

3. Nothing is impossible with God. Why did Jesus ask the disciples to resolve the predicament? It is like a father asking a child, "We have no more rice. What shall we do?" It is for disciple training. Jesus was giving them the lesson of co-working with God. What is interesting here is that the test question that Jesus set was not on big subjects such as politics or economics but on what to eat for dinner - a trivial and mundane routine in our daily lives! We should not be surprised because *"One who is faithful in a very little is also faithful in much, and one who is dishonest in a very little is also dishonest in much."* (Luke 16:10) Dear brothers and sisters, our faith should be seen in the smallest thing in our everyday life. For instance, do your habits reflect Christ's compassion and generosity? Our selfish ways of living or working could easily hinder our family or friends' desire to find God.

12 ... he told his disciples, "Gather up the leftover fragments, that nothing may be lost." 13 So they gathered them up and filled twelve baskets with fragments from the five barley loaves left by those who had eaten.

Mankind's tendency to waste natural resources is evident in a buffet meal. Many people today would have been perplexed by the Lord's instruction to save the scraps: Why bother eating leftover food when he can produce fresh food from nothing? When we don't have much, we might treasure it. Yet even when

we have a lot, we fail to appreciate it. Grace, love, and material possessions are all examples of this. Most people know how to live in scarcity but not abundance. Jesus was setting up an example of how to care for the creation that God had given to people, teaching that each resource is a gift from God and should be appreciated rather than wasted. The miracle of the five loaves and two fish depicts a spectacular and beautiful scene: Grace multiplies when we extend it to others. This is the principle in the Kingdom of God. The grace of God will be wasted if we don't share it with others. Dear brothers and sisters, *freely you have received; freely give* (Mt 10:8). Let us examine ourselves regularly: Do I share God's grace with others like my Lord Jesus did, or do I keep what He has given me to myself? *“One gives freely, yet grows all the richer; another withholds what he should give, and only suffers want.”* (Prov 11:24)

P1 Grace multiplies when we extend it to others

B. 6:14–21 Jesus walked on the sea

14 When the people saw the sign that he had done, they said, “This is indeed the Prophet who is to come into the world!” 15 Perceiving then that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, Jesus withdrew again to the mountain by himself. 16 When evening came, his disciples went down to the sea, 17 got into a boat, and started across the sea to Capernaum. It was now dark, and Jesus had not yet come to them.

“This is indeed the Prophet who is to come into the world!” refers to God's promise of a prophet like Moses in Deuteronomy 18:15-19 *“The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your brothers—it is to him you shall listen—”*

A Rabbi's teaching regarding this is: “As the first redeemer caused manna to descend,...so will the last redeemer cause food to descend”¹. The Israelites ate the miraculous manna in the wilderness under the leadership of Moses; now, Jesus fed them with another great miracle in the wilderness of Bethsaida. The parallelism in this miracle convinced them that Jesus was the second Moses!

This interpretation was not wrong. What was wrong was their reaction when they realised this – they wanted to make Jesus king by force (v.15). The Lord Jesus was indeed the King of the Jews and the world. But he withdrew from the multitude just as he declined the temptation of Satan in the wilderness of Jordan. This was neither the day nor the way the Father appointed for Jesus' coronation. The Lord knew His way was the way of the cross. Jesus' absolute obedience to the Father was long-lasting, from incarnation in the heavenly palace to death on the Calvary cross and every moment in the 33 years in between. Dear brothers and sisters, how have you obeyed Jesus since you accepted Him as your Lord and Saviour?

The movement of the multitude was also a temptation of fame and power to the disciples. John and James could be the prime ministers, Judah Iscariot, the finance minister, and Peter, the defence minister. Particularly considering that they recently cast out many demons, healed many who were sick, proclaimed the Gospel and led many to repentance (Mark 6:7- 13). They were most vulnerable to spiritual arrogance at this point and could be easily compromised by the enthusiasm of the throng. They might go along to make Jesus king to fulfill their ambitions!

¹ F.F.Bruce, *The Gospel of John* (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1983), p.146

Dear brothers and sisters, the tempter who tried to entice Jesus and failed is constantly enticing us with fame and power. We should ask ourselves if this is part of God's plan when tempted. If it is not, we should stick to our assigned path.

The Lord Jesus knew that the movement would harm the disciples. Mark and Matthew tell us that He spared no time. *"Immediately he made his disciples get into the boat and go before him to the other side, to Bethsaida, while he dismissed the crowd"* (Mark 6:45). In doing so, Jesus separated the disciples from the infectious crowd.

After dismissing the crowd, Jesus withdrew to the mountain and prayed. The disciples were on their way to Capernaum. However, that night *"The sea became rough because a strong wind was blowing."* (6:18)

Did Jesus know there would be a storm when he sent the disciples on the boat? Of course, he did. Why did he lead them out of one danger and into another? The disciples had just witnessed the magnificent miracle of five loaves and two fish. Like the multitude, they were spiritually very high. The Lord desires for them to bring their faith to life. They were not the victims during the test of faith, feeding the five thousand. However, during the storm, their lives were threatened.

"19 When they had rowed about three or four miles, they saw Jesus walking on the sea and coming near the boat, and they were frightened." (6:19)

It was about five miles from Bethsaida of Julius to Capernaum. The wind was against the disciples, slowing their progress. They only travelled three miles before Jesus came to their rescue (Mk 6:48). This incident involved two miracles. First, Jesus walked on the sea, manifesting that he is the Lord of the ocean. Second, when he was on board, the boat was at its destination immediately (6:21), manifesting that He is the Lord of time.

The disciples were frightened by the storm. Now they were more frightened because they thought they saw a ghost (Mark 6:49)

20 But he said to them, "It is I; do not be afraid." 21 Then they were glad to take him into the boat, and immediately the boat was at the land to which they were going.

Like the disciples, we may encounter storms after submitting to God's will. However, we can trust that Jesus will come to our aid and guide us to our intended destination.

If our Lord is with us through the storms of life, do you not think He will be with us when we face the most frightening and difficult moment – death? I believe Jesus would not be waiting for us at the golden shore of eternity. Rather, when we make headway painfully in the storm of death, the Lord, who had gone ahead of us to taste and conquer death, will walk on the sea of death and come to us. He will say, *"It is I; do not be afraid."* He will accompany us to the serene golden shore and the heavenly paradise. Praise be to God!

C. Closing

The Gospel of John is relatively brief on the miracle. However, John is the only one who recorded the epilogue of the miracle: the crowd were zealous to crown Jesus king, as well as Jesus' first self-proclamation of "I am the bread of life" (next lesson). This is likely the focal point of this miracle.

In the next lesson, we shall see that most of these fanatics left Jesus after hearing his proclamation. We also know that later, when the Lord set out on the true path of coronation – glory through suffering, more people rejected him and detested him, “*Crucify him! Crucify him!*”

Dear brothers and sisters, the Triune God is still rolling out the salvation plan today according to His eternal decree. As humans, our finite understanding limits our ability to comprehend the work of God. We rely on the grace of God to understand the truth that He has revealed. Praise the Lord that He is full of grace and truth! We must pray for the Holy Spirit to help us comprehend and love the truth.

The truth that Jesus is the King of all has become a fact! He will return to rebuild a better Eden for us. Let us crown him the king of our life, marriage, and church now!

