

THE BREAD OF LIFE JOHN 6:1-15

When Dewit Wallace was recovering from shrapnel wounds in an Army hospital in France during the First World War, he read every magazine that he could get his hands on. As he was devouring anything that he could in order to pass the time, he felt that most of the articles that he read were just too long. There was a lot of filler, the author could have made his point in a much more brief fashion.

Well, after his discharge, Wallace decided to bounce this thought off of some publishers. What about a journal with condensed articles- direct and to the point. The experts were very much unimpressed. Of the few publishers who bothered to reply to Wallace's letters at all, only William Randolph Hearst thought the magazine would have any merit, but he said that it didn't have potential for any more than a circulation of 30 thousand- much too small a venture for him to undertake. Now Dewit Wallace didn't realize it at the time, but the publisher's replies were best for him in the long run. For he and his wife, Lila Belle, convinced that the idea was a good one, began to send out appeals for provisional subscriptions to this new magazine. Now, mind you, there was no magazine. But they began to appeal to every faculty member in all of the colleges across the nation, to women's clubs and professional groups of all kinds, soliciting subscriptions for their new idea. When they had subscriptions totaling 5,000 dollars, they borrowed another 1,300 and placed an order with a Pittsburg printer for 5,000 copies of the first issue of Reader's

Digest. Soon, the magazine began to multiply beyond the couple's fondest dreams. 50,000 subscriptions in 1926, 228,000 in 1929. Today, the Reader's Digest sells some 30 million copies a month, and is printed in some 13 languages distributed in 170 countries around the world.

When some idea takes off and multiplies and grows, everyone is fascinated with it. People love to see some new idea that is designed to meet specific needs that people have become successful and grow to fulfill those needs.

If we become fascinated when this happens in the business realm, with some creative concept that naturally takes off and multiplies and flourishes, we can only imagine how the people of Christ's day responded to the supernatural miracle that Jesus performed multiplying the loaves and fishes to meet the physical need of hunger in the lives of 5,000 men along with women and children who accompanied them.

It is no wonder that this specific miracle of Jesus was such a fascinating and popular one. It certainly does not surprise us to realize that this is the only miracle that is recorded by all 4 gospel writers. Nor does it shock us to see the response of the multitudes after Jesus was finished with this miracle. As the word spread that he was able to feed probably at least some 15,000 people including women and children with 5 small loaves and 2 small fish, there was a movement to make this man to be their king. This kind of power is what is needed to overthrow the unwanted yoke of the Romans. If this man can meet our physical needs of hunger in this way, he certainly would be able to meet all

of our other physical needs as well.

Yet, the vast majority of people missed the whole point of the feeding of the 5,000. For Jesus Christ performed this miracle primarily to teach a great and critical spiritual truth to them. John was one of the few who caught the major point of Christ's miracle. So he includes it with the other 6 miracles that he chose to give with the purpose that those who observe these miracles might believe that Jesus is the Christ the son of the living God, and that thru believing they might have life thru his name. Follow along as I read the account of this miracle found in John 6:1-15 and then the interpretation that Jesus himself gives concerning this miracle the following day found in verses 26-35:

JN 6:1 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 miraculous signs he had performed on the sick. ³ Then Jesus went up on a mountainside and sat down with his disciples. ⁴ The Jewish Passover Feast was near.

JN 6:5 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.

JN 6:7 Philip answered him, "Eight months' wages would not buy enough bread for each one to have a bite!"

JN 6:8 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?"

JN 6:10 Jesus said, "Have the people sit down." There was plenty of grass in that place, and the men sat down, about five thousand of them. 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.

JN 6:12 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.

JN 6:14 After the people saw the miraculous sign that Jesus did, they began to say, "Surely this is the Prophet who is to come into the world." ¹⁵ Jesus, knowing that they intended to come and make him king by force, withdrew again to a mountain by himself.

JN 6:26 Jesus answered, "I tell you the truth, you are looking for me, not because you saw miraculous signs but because you ate the loaves and had your fill. ²⁷ Do not work for food that spoils, but for food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you. On him God the Father has placed his seal of approval."

JN 6:28 Then they asked him, "What must we do to do the works God requires?"

JN 6:29 Jesus answered, "The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent."

JN 6:30 So they asked him, "What miraculous sign then will you give that we may see it and believe you? What will you do? ³¹ Our forefathers ate the manna in the desert; as it is written: 'He gave them bread from heaven to eat.' "

JN 6:32 Jesus said to them, "I tell you the truth, it is not Moses who has given you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven. ³³ For the bread of God is he who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world."

JN 6:34 "Sir," they said, "from now on give us this bread."

JN 6:35 Then Jesus declared, "I am the bread of life. He who comes to me will never go hungry, and he who believes in me will never be thirsty."

There are a couple of ways to look at this miracle. One way is to see this miracle as a model of how to approach seemingly impossible situations in life. And that is undoubtedly the reason for Jesus bringing the disciples into this miraculous process- to teach them how to approach impossible situations. Christ was going to commission his followers with a seemingly impossible task before he left this earth to ascend back into heaven following his resurrection. "Go into all the world and make disciples in every nation." Multiply this truth that I have given to you millions of times. A seemingly impossible task. It certainly would have seemed overwhelming to them. Perhaps they looked back on this miracle of feeding the 5,000 men many times in their later lives to find encouragement and strength in facing impossible tasks.

Philip tried the rational approach in facing this seemingly impossible task. 8 month's wages would not be enough to give every person even a little bit to eat. When facing a seemingly impossible situation, the best made plans are just not good enough.

Andrew got busy working and finds a small boy with a bag lunch – 5 loaves and 2 small fish. That's the only food he could find among the crowd. But what good would such a tiny lunch be in feeding such a huge crowd? It's

interesting that Jesus is going to use Andrew's efforts as part of the solution, but human effort by itself can't make much of a dent in a seemingly impossible situation.

These 2 approaches represent what we normally try in facing life's situations. We try to figure out a solution as best as we can with human reasoning and then work as hard as can towards a solution. With most of life's situations, we can get by pretty well with this approach. But when we face a seemingly impossible situation, we see how inadequate this approach really is.

Jesus wanted to teach this lesson to his disciples. He also had a very clear spiritual truth that he wanted to teach through the spiritual symbolism of this miracle. These undoubtedly are the reasons for this miracle being included in all 4 gospel accounts, and especially the reason why John included it for we know that John chose his 7 miracles very carefully to increase the faith of his readers.

The basic setting of this miracle can be surmised quite completely from comparing the 4 gospel accounts. The 12 disciples had just returned from a preaching mission. Jesus has just heard of the martyrdom of cousin, John the Baptist. So Jesus is leading his disciples away for a little R & R – some rest for the disciples who have just returned from an exhausting mission and some recuperation time for Jesus who is undoubtedly feeling sad from his personal family loss. Some people find out where they are, however, and word soon spreads so that a large multitude gathers – 5,000 men along with women and

children, probably at least 15,000 people total. Jesus teaches these people throughout the day but now it is late afternoon. Matthew sandwiches this miracle between the 2 Jewish evenings. The first Jewish evening, the time of the evening sacrifice, was 3:00 in the afternoon. The official Jewish evening that closed out the Jewish day was 6:00 pm. So we know that this miracle took place in the late afternoon, between 3 and 6 pm. So we can imagine how this large multitude of people who have been patiently listening to Christ's teaching throughout the day are now having their physical needs catch up with them – they are becoming very hungry.

Jesus takes the 5 small barley loaves and 2 small fish and multiplies them to the point where all the 15,000 people are fully satisfied physically. There are even 12 baskets of leftovers that are collected by the disciples.

Because it is the Apostle John's purpose to select specific miracles that will increase our faith, he is very careful to give the spiritual truth that Jesus intended to teach these people through the performing of this miraculous feeding. The people wrongly interpreted this miracle as an indication that Jesus could immediately meet all of their physical needs at any time, under any conditions – so he would make an excellent King. But Jesus had an entirely different message that he intended for these people to receive from this miracle and he clarified it for them the following day.

1. The bread did not just represent blessings that God is willing to give to his people to meet their needs, blessings like food and shelter and jobs and

health and family and security. No, the bread was a picture of Jesus Christ himself. “I am the bread of life; the one who comes to me will never hunger,” Jesus told the people.

Now it is extremely important for us to see this great lesson that Jesus was teaching these people here for our natural way of trying to meet our needs is usually the opposite approach. When we sense some need in our lives, we naturally seek to find some **thing** to meet that need. If we are hungry, we try to find some food. If we are tired, we try to get some rest. If we are lonely, we try to find a companion. We tend to think that the answer to our problem is the lack of some **thing**. Now it is true that God most often meets our needs through providing some thing to satisfy them, but the truth that Jesus Christ is teaching here is that the ultimate satisfaction that we all crave in life is God himself. As we have a personal relationship with God through the Lord Jesus Christ, all other **things** become secondary in our lives. The joy and peace and fulfillment that we find in our relationship with Christ is so much greater than any pleasure that we could ever find in any **thing** that we find ourselves never hungering or thirsting spiritually again. Instead of seeking the blessings of God and viewing God only as the giver of those blessings, we find ourselves truly seeking God himself. The blessings just become the icing on the cake, good gifts to be enjoyed and used for the spreading of God’s benevolence to others. Jesus Christ is the way, the only way, to satisfy the spiritual longing of our heart. He is the only staple diet for the Christian life. He is the only one who

can bring complete and lasting satisfaction to our lives. So through this miracle, and the personal interpretation that He Himself gives to it, Jesus Christ reveals himself to be the only indispensable need that we all have in our lives.

Martin Luther, that great reformation leader, used to often say, “When Satan comes knocking at the door of my heart and asks, ‘who lives here?’ I reply, ‘Martin Luther used to live here, but he has moved out. Jesus Christ lives here now’.” No wonder Martin Luther could manifest the strength and courage necessary to lead the great reformation. No wonder he was willing to risk all of his earthly security in life. Luther had found Jesus Christ to be the bread of life. He had found absolute satisfaction in life. So his security, his position, his reputation, his retirement pension, everything else in life was secondary to his learning the secret of Jesus Christ being the bread of life.

2. But we must go on to see a second part of the symbolism of this miracle this morning as well. For the bread being a picture of Jesus Christ does not fully explain the miracle. No, there is also the miraculous multiplication, isn't there? Jesus Christ could have provided bread in a very natural manner and explained that the bread represented him if it was only his intent to teach the fact that he was and is indispensable to our spiritual lives. But Christ chose to supernaturally multiply the loaves and fishes to meet the needs of everyone present. This methodology is also important for us to note for the bread was multiplied through distribution.

Now exactly how this miracle took place has been debated among

theologians. And frankly nobody knows for sure. There are several different opinions. One is that the miracle took place in Christ's hands. As he broke the bread and the fish, there was just continually more to give. So as the first disciples emptied their baskets giving out the food to the people, they would get back in line and receive more from the hands of Jesus when their turn came again. The imperfect tense of the verb used could denote this continuous action of Jesus Christ giving and giving and giving the bread and fishes to his disciples. Others have guessed that after Jesus gave one basketful to each disciple (and this, of course, would require some multiplication itself), the major multiplication occurred as the baskets were passed through the crowds and they never emptied so that after everyone ate, there were still 12 baskets remaining full. We can't be dogmatic as to how this miracle actually occurred. But we do know this. The food was multiplied as it was distributed. The more that was distributed, the more food there was even to the point where after everyone had eaten, there was more left over than there even was in the first place.

Now I believe that Jesus was teaching a lesson to his disciples through this methodology. Remember the setting: the disciples are supposed to be on a brief vacation with Jesus. They are trying to get some well-deserved rest after their short term mission trips. They are even somewhat resentful of the intrusion of all these people. "Send them away" one of the gospel accounts has the disciples saying to Jesus. Having missed the companionship of Jesus for a

while, the disciples are eager to have their Master to themselves for a period of time. They want to be alone with him, to feast themselves on his teachings, to rest, to be built up physically and spiritually. But Jesus looks upon the multitudes with compassion. Even though he is grieving the loss of his cousin, he models serving others as the natural result of true godliness for his disciples.

All of us as Christians are interested in victorious Christian living. But as we sometimes examine our own lives and our motives, we sometimes must admit that we have some selfish motives. We want a victorious Christian life for our own benefit. We want power for living. We want peace and freedom from anxiety. We want joy and contentment in any life situation. We want to be more loving people because that's a character trait that we greatly admire. We want self-control because it will make us a better person. In short, we desire victory for ourselves. We are like the disciples. Perfectly willing to get rid of the other people so that we can have God all to ourselves.

This type of approach never brings what we are looking for. For the bread is multiplied through distribution. Jesus Christ is the bread of life, he is sufficient for every one of our spiritual needs. But the paradox of the Christian life is that our relationship with him grows as we are active in sharing him with others. There is a multiplication through distribution. We might naturally think that the bread would be multiplied as it is hoarded, but such is not the case. It is as we share Jesus Christ through our life that we find an even deeper

personal relationship with him. As we use the gifts and abilities that God has given to us to serve others, the gospel message of Jesus Christ is multiplied through distribution and our lives are enriched and developed more fully as well.

Oliver Cromwell was an amazing English leader in the first half of the 17th century. He actually was able to become the ruler of England for almost 5 years as its “Lord Protector”. As a Protestant Reformer, Cromwell opposed the flamboyant and extravagant excesses of the established Church of England. On one occasion, Cromwell was visiting one of his country’s historic cathedrals. He saw there 12 large statues of pure silver lining the walls of a side chapel. “What are these?” he asked his guide. “These are the 12 Apostles”, the guide replied. “The 12 Apostles are they,” Cromwell answered gruffly. “They should be taken down and coined into money so that they could be like their Master, going about, doing good.”

“Send them away”, the disciples said. “Serve them” came the reply from the Master. Give them bread that pictures me, teaching them that if they have a personal relationship with God through me, they will never hunger again spiritually. And as you are serving them, learn the further lesson that the truth is multiplied through distribution.