

Feeding Thousands, Walking on Water and Working (John 6:1-29)

Expository Lessons from the Gospel of John

I. Background, from Previous Lessons

- a. Jesus healed a man who had been crippled for 38 years.
- b. His enemies then want to kill him, because he did this healing on the Sabbath (Saturday). In the Law of Moses (**Exodus 31**) it said that Jews who “work” on the Sabbath should be put to death.
- c. Jesus responded by saying He was, in fact working on the Sabbath, just as His Father was always at work; thus, making himself equal with God. This angered his enemies *even more*.
- d. While Jesus’ enemies accused Him of breaking the Law of Moses, Jesus countered,
 - i. “Do not think I shall accuse you to the Father; there is one who accuses you—Moses, in whom you trust. For if you believed Moses” you would believe Me; for he wrote about Me. But if you do not believe his writings, how will you believe My words?” (**John 5:45-47**, NKJV)
 - ii. Here Jesus is alluding to the prophecy given by Moses 1400 years before, in **Deuteronomy 18:15-19**: in the future, Moses said, God would “raise up” a prophet like him from their brothers; and that anyone who did not follow that prophet would be cut off.
 - iii. Peter later explains the significance of that prophecy, which he applies to Jesus.
 1. “For Moses truly said to the fathers, “The LORD your God will raise up for you a Prophet like me from your brethren. Him you shall hear in all things, whatever He says to you. And it shall be that every soul who will not hear that Prophet shall be utterly destroyed from among the people.” (**Acts 3:22-23**, NKJV)
- e. If we keep this prophecy in mind, I believe it will help us to better understand some things that follow in the next few chapters of **John**.

II. Jesus Miraculously Feeds 5,000 Men

- a. (Read **John 6:1-14**)

- b. This may be the first major story in the ministry of Jesus (or certainly one of the first) that is also discussed in the other three gospels.
 - i. In fact, it is discussed in all three other gospels: in **Matthew 14:13-21**, **Mark 6:30-44** and **Luke 9:10-17**.
 - ii. Elements common to all four accounts include:
 - 1. Only five loaves and two fish;
 - 2. People sit down, Jesus gives thanks, his disciples distribute the food;
 - 3. A crowd of thousands is fed (5,000 men, plus women and children); and
 - 4. The disciples gather plenty of leftovers after the meal.
 - iii. Details discussed *in other accounts* but not in **John 6** include:
 - 1. The people sit down arranged in groups of 50's.
 - 2. Jesus looked to heaven, blessed the loaves and broke them before handing them to the disciples for distribution (reminds me of the Last Supper).
 - 3. There were *twelve* baskets of fragments of bread collected at the end.
- c. The major difference between the account in John is that it discusses significant spiritual applications that Jesus (and others) make from this miracle. It is used as the backdrop and introduction for some significant teaching.
 - i. Those who witnessed this miracle remarked, "This is truly *the Prophet who is to come into the world.*" (**John 6:14**, NKJV)
 - ii. This of course is referring to "the Prophet" that Moses, 1400 years earlier, had said would come.
 - 1. "The Lord your God will raise up for you a Prophet like me from your brethren. Him you shall hear," (**Deuteronomy 18:15**, LXX, OSB)
 - 2. This is what the priests, Levites and Pharisees were waiting for, as they asked John the Baptist "Are you the Prophet?" (**John 1:21, 1:24**)

3. This is what Philip was referring to when he said to Nathanael “We have found Him of whom Moses in the law, and also the prophets wrote – Jesus of Nazareth...” (**John 1:45**)
 4. This also is what Jesus was referring to when He said, “For if you believed Moses, you would believe Me; for he wrote about Me.” (**John 5:46**, NKJV)
 5. Peter in **Acts 3:22-23** and Stephen in **Acts 7:37** confirmed that this prophecy of Moses from **Deuteronomy 18:15-19** was fulfilled in Jesus. Jesus was the promised “Prophet like Moses” whom God “raised up”.
- iii. **Question:** Why, after Jesus miraculously fed thousands of people, did people start to wonder if He was the one to come, promised by Moses?
1. **Answer:** Because Moses said the Prophet to come would be “like me” (*similar to Moses*). Feeding thousands of people with bread miraculously is just what Moses did starting in **Exodus 16**, providing the manna in the Wilderness!
 - a. Similarities: thousands of people, nothing to eat; God’s prophet miraculously provides food for them all.
 - b. Moses fed about 600,000 men, plus women and children. (**Exodus 12:37, Numbers 1:45-46**)
 - c. The people with Moses were fed daily (manna gathered 6 days/week) throughout the 40 years they were in the Wilderness.
- iv. **Question:** Does this miraculously feeding lots of people remind us of any other story in the Old Testament? Are there any other possible foreshadowings of this event?
1. Read miracles performed by Elisha, in **2 Kings 4:38-44**
 - a. Elisha was a prophet, introduced as the “understudy” of the famous prophet Elijah.
 - b. In this story he feeds a hundred men with a few (20) barley loaves, and the story mentions that there was food left over.
 2. **Question:** If John the Baptist came “in the spirit and power of Elijah” (**Luke 1:17**) and was “the Elijah to come” (**Matthew 11:14**), the one who would “prepare the way before the Lord” and come “before the coming of the great and glorious day of the Lord” (**Malachi 3:1** and **4:5**; or **Malachi 3:22** in the LXX),

then who would Elisha most likely foreshadow? Recall that he was anointed by Elijah (**1 Kings 19:16**), to succeed him.

- a. **Answer:** If Elijah foreshadowed John the Baptist, then it makes sense that *Elisha would foreshadow Jesus*. (Consider **Matthew 17:10-12**, and the miracles that both Elisha and Jesus performed.)
- v. Tertullian, an early Christian teacher from North Africa writing around the year 207 AD, points to this miraculous feeding with the five barley loaves as being foreshadowed by Moses and Elisha.
 1. “For he (*Moses*) not for one day, but during forty years; not on the inferior nourishment of bread and fish, but with the manna of heaven; supported the lives of not five thousand, but of six hundred thousand human beings.
 2. “However, such was the greatness of His (*Jesus*)’ miracle, that He willed the slender supply of food, not only to be enough, but even to prove superabundant; and herein He followed the ancient precedent....
 3. (*Then after mentioning the story of Elijah miraculously providing for the widow of Zarephath in 1 Kings 17, Tertullian points to a story of Elisha in 2 Kings 4*)...“you will discover all this conduct of Christ pursued by that man of God, who ordered ten barley loaves which had been given him to be distributed among the people; and when his attendant, after contrasting the large number of the persons with the small supply of the food, answered, ‘What, shall I set this before a hundred men?’ he said again, ‘Give them, and they shall eat: for thus says the Lord, They shall eat, and shall leave thereof, according to the word of the Lord.’ O Christ, even in Your novelties (*new things -CP*) You are old!”
 - a. (Source: Tertullian, *Against Marcion*, Book 4, chapter 21, in Ante-Nicene Fathers vol. 3, p. 381)
 4. Points that Tertullian is making here:
 - a. Christ’s miraculous feeding was foreshadowed by Moses providing the manna (feeding a much larger crowd than Jesus, and repeatedly instead of just for one day).
 - b. However, while Moses provided just enough manna for everyone, Christ provided an abundance (*greater* in the sense that they even had food *left over*).

- c. In this abundance, Jesus was following another ancient example; that of Elisha, who:
 - i. also fed people with barley loaves (typically bread of poor people); and
 - ii. also had food left over.
- d. The new things that Christ did were reminiscent of earlier miracles of the Old Testament, showing his continuity (the same God) and ancient foreshadowings.

III. Jesus Walks on the Sea of Galilee

- a. (Read **John 6:15-21**)
- b. Additional details are provided in the accounts in **Matthew 14:22-33** and **Mark 6:45-52**.
 - i. Piecing together the details from all four accounts:
 1. People want to make Jesus king, by force.
 2. He escapes to the mountain alone, *to pray* (**Matthew 14:23, Mark 6:46**).
 3. Sends his disciples along in the boat.
 4. At night, walking across the sea, they are terrified, thinking it is a ghost (**Matthew 14:26, Mark 6:49**).
 5. He reassures them, "It is I, do not be afraid."
 6. Peter also walks on the water, to meet Jesus.
 - a. "And Peter answered Him and said, "Lord, if it is You, command me to come to You on the water." So He said, 'Come.' And when Peter had come down out of the boat, he walked on the water to go to Jesus. But when he saw that the wind was boisterous, he was afraid; and beginning to sink he cried out, saying, 'Lord, save me!' And immediately Jesus stretched out His hand and caught him, and said to him, 'O you of little faith, why did you doubt?' And when they got into the boat, the wind ceased." (**Matthew 14:28-32, NKJV**)
 - ii. Significance of this miracle
 1. Disciples are stunned by this. The reaction recorded in **Matthew 14** account: "Then those who were in the boat came

and worshiped Him, saying, “Truly You are the Son of God.”
(**Matthew 14:33**, NKJV)

2. So, what should we do with this story?
3. The reaction of many people today: they think this event “crosses the line” of believe-ability. Walking on the *top of the sea*?!? They doubt this story actually happened; would like to accept the good moral and ethical teachings of Jesus, but discard the miraculous.
 - a. I make my living as a “water engineer”, within the field of civil/environmental engineering, designing all types of water infrastructure: tanks, pumps, pipes, tunnels, open channels, treatment plants – you name it. I studied hydraulics and fluid mechanics in college, and use that knowledge regularly in my work. I think about water all the time. And I can tell you for certain: according to the laws of physics (fluid mechanics), liquid water *does not* behave the way it says in **John 6** (supporting the weight of people standing on it). However, if Jesus was the Son of God, through whom the universe and all the laws of physics were made, then I must admit that He can alter and set aside those physical laws whenever He chooses! (As an engineer, that is how I view miracles of the Bible like this.)
 - b. If you believe Jesus rose from the dead on the third day, and that He is, in fact, the Son of God through whom the universe was made, and that He will call all the dead out of their graves on the Last Day and judge them (at the very center of the Christian faith), then you can believe all these other miracles, too.
 - c. However, we can’t pick-and-choose, saying you want to follow the moral teachings but reject the miracles. His disciples said these things really happened; and went to their death maintaining that. There is nothing moral about a religion if it is based on lies and deception!
4. There are plenty of other “miraculous crossings of water” recorded in the Scriptures. Examples:
 - a. Moses parting the Red Sea; leading the people through it. However, the Egyptians were drowned when they followed and the waters returned.

- i. “So the children of Israel went into the midst of the sea on the dry ground, and the waters were a wall to them on their right hand and on their left.” (**Exodus 14:22**, NKJV)
 - ii. As we discussed in a prior lesson, Eusebius (bishop of the church in Caesarea, Palestine) writing c. 320 AD in *Proof of the Gospel*, Book 3, pointed to this power over the wind and waves, and ability to cross the sea and bring another along (Jesus calling Peter) were more ways in which Jesus was a prophet “like Moses”, confirming the prophecy of **Deuteronomy 18:15-19**.
 - b. Joshua and the Israelites crossing the Jordan River into the Promised Land, in **Joshua 3:15-4:7**.
 - c. Elijah and Elisha, crossing the Jordan River, which divided after being struck with the mantle of Elijah, in **2 Kings 2:8-14**.
 - d. Jonah also “crossed the sea” miraculously (more like a submarine crossing!), surviving for three days in the belly of a whale or huge sea creature, in **Jonah 2**, before being delivered up onto dry land.
- iii. Are there any lessons *for us* in this story?
 1. First Lesson: When Jesus was facing overwhelming challenges (some people wanted to kill Him; others wanted to make Him king by force), what did He do? What do *we* typically do?
 - a. Things that many of us do when facing overwhelming challenges in their lives include:
 - i. Run around from person to person asking everyone’s advice. (However, seeking out a few counselors who have spiritual wisdom certainly can be a very good thing!)
 - ii. Escaping to find comfort in:
 1. Alcohol, drugs, pornography, etc.
 2. Food
 3. Music
 4. Entertainment
 5. Hobbies or other activities

- b. However, Jesus withdrew to an isolated place, to pray and to draw strength from his Father. (**John 6:15**, **Matthew 14:23**)
 - i. “who, in the days of His flesh, when He had offered up prayers and supplications, with vehement cries and tears to Him who was able to save Him from death, and was heard because of His godly fear,” (**Hebrews 5:7**, NKJV)
 - ii. The application is made for us, in **Hebrews**:
 “Seeing then that we have a great High Priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. For we do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need.” (**Hebrews 4:14–16**, NKJV)
 - iii. Paul encourages us in **Romans 8:34** that Jesus is at the right hand of God now, interceding for us.
- 2. Second Lesson: Peter’s stepping out of the boat is a true picture of faith in action demonstrated by works (obedience) and the grace (= favor, assistance) of God to help us when we fall short.
 - a. He did what Jesus called him to do. He stepped out of the boat, and even was able to walk on the water for a short time.
 - b. He put it all on the line and was willing to do something that could seem very foolish. (See **1 Corinthians 4:10** where Paul characterizes Jesus’ followers as “fools for Christ” and **1 Corinthians 15:19** where Paul says, “if in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men the most pitiable.”)
 - c. When he panicked, his faith wavered and he started to sink, he turned to Jesus and was caught.
 - d. This to me is a picture of a saving faith. Without Jesus we can do nothing; however, it involves our believing and obeying. With that kind of willing-to-step-out-of-the-boat faith, God can do miraculous things. God will

also help us when we falter, providing His grace in our time of need.

IV. Jesus Calls People to Another Kind of 'Work'

- a. (Read **John 6:22-29**)
- b. Summary of the story:
 - i. The people chase Jesus, following in boats, until they find Him on other side of the sea.
 - ii. Jesus says the only reason they are seeking him is they liked the "free lunch"; *not* because they saw miracles done by God's power!
 1. "Jesus answered them and said, 'Most assuredly, I say to you, you seek Me, not because you saw the signs, but because you ate of the loaves and were filled.'" (**John 6:26**, NKJV)
 2. It seems to me that Jesus thinks that the people see Him as "Moses, version 2.0", meaning that He will feed them with bread on an ongoing basis.
 - a. That would mean no more wheat planting, harvesting, threshing, milling, baking, working, etc. At last, *no more having to work for food!*
- c. Jesus uses this as an opportunity to teach important spiritual lessons regarding "work" and "food".
 - i. The key word in this passage is "work" (verb and noun) used four times in the original Greek here (may not come across as clearly depending on the translation you are using).
 1. And as in English, the word "work" can be either a noun (as in, "He was tired after a day's *work* in the field") or a verb (as in, "I *worked* yesterday").
 - ii. So here is the way it reads, using "work/ works" *all four times* where it appears in the text (resulting in awkward English, but this is what it says literally, as you can see in a Greek/English interlinear Bible).
 1. In **John 6:27** Jesus says, "Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food which endures to eternal life..."
 2. The people respond to Jesus in **John 6:28**. "Then they said to Him, 'What should we do in order that we may work the works of God?'"

3. Then, in **John 6:29**, “Jesus answered and said to them, “This is the work of God, that you believe in Him whom He sent.”
- iii. The *contrast* Jesus is using here to make His point:
 1. Doing *physical work* (planting, harvesting, threshing, milling) for physical *bread that will not last*, versus
 2. Doing *spiritual work* (faith in Jesus, with all that saving faith entails) for spiritual *food that will endure to eternal life*.
 - a. You can observe from the context that Jesus here *is not* denigrating the importance of obedience to His commands, including serving the poor, etc., sometimes referred to as “works” or “good works”.
 - iv. This is important to understand because in many churches today **John 6:29** is taken out of context to support the conclusion, “all you have to do is believe; *works have nothing whatsoever to do with your salvation.*”
 1. There are two versions of Christianity floating out there:
 - a. The first says you have to believe in Jesus and do what He says. (This is the original version.)
 - b. The second says all you have to do is believe, that Jesus did everything else for us. (This newer version relies on a few select verses, taken out of context.)
 2. However, saving faith is defined for us in **Hebrews 11** (with the same word, “belief” used throughout). There, from examples, we are shown what saving faith involves:
 - a. “The righteous shall live by faith” (**Hebrews 10:36-39**, quoting from **Habakkuk 2:3-4** from the LXX) is the introduction to the **Hebrews 11** chapter on faith. Saving faith is a way of life; much more than simply intellectual belief.
 - b. Obedience is an important aspect of saving faith. (**Hebrews 11:7**, by faith Noah built the ark; **Hebrews 11:17**, Abraham offered up Isaac; **Hebrews 11:30**, by faith the walls of Jericho fell when the people marched around them for seven days)
 - c. Perseverance through trials is a critical component of saving faith, as well. (**Hebrews 11:27**, by faith Moses “endured as seeing Him who is invisible)

3. This is totally consistent with what Jesus taught elsewhere in the **gospel of John**:
 - a. “If anyone does not abide in Me, he is cast out as a branch and is withered; and they gather them and throw them into the fire, and they are burned.” (**John 15:6**, NKJV)
 - b. “As the Father loved Me, I also have loved you; abide in My love. If you keep My commandments, you will abide in My love, just as I have kept My Father’s commandments and abide in His love.” (**John 15:9–10**, NKJV)
4. Jesus would later say to the church in Sardis:
 - a. “And to the angel of the church in Sardis write, “These things says He who has the seven Spirits of God and the seven stars: “I know your works, that you have a name that you are alive, but you are dead. Be watchful, and strengthen the things which remain, that are ready to die, for I have not found your works perfect before God.” (**Revelation 3:1–2**, NKJV)
 - i. Note that the word “perfect” as used here means “complete” (*not* “flawless”).
5. Near the close of the **Book of Revelation** we find this sobering account of the judgment, confirming the importance of works:
 - a. “Then I saw a great white throne and Him who sat on it, from whose face the earth and the heaven fled away. And there was found no place for them. And I saw the dead, small and great, standing before God, and books were opened. And another book was opened, which is the Book of Life. And the dead were judged according to their works, by the things which were written in the books. The sea gave up the dead who were in it, and Death and Hades delivered up the dead who were in them. And they were judged, each one according to his works.” (**Revelation 20:11–13**, NKJV)
6. We will close with something that the apostle Paul said to the church in Corinth.
 - a. “Moreover, brethren, I declare to you the gospel which I preached to you, which also you received and in which you stand, by which also you are saved, *if you hold fast*

that word which I preached to you—unless you believed in vain.” (1 Corinthians 15:1-2, NKJV)

- i. Paul tells the Corinthians that their belief in his gospel would be IN VAIN unless they *hold fast* to what he taught them (they must complete their belief with obedience and perseverance).
- v. **Conclusion:** what Jesus taught in **John 6:29** is often taken out of context today, as part of a counterfeit gospel that all you need to do is believe in Jesus. That does not square with the context of what He was saying in this passage, nor does it match what we find throughout the gospel of John and the New Testament. True faith in Jesus is a way of life, involving repentance, commitment to a set-apart life and perseverance through trials, to the end.