

# Meal Miracle

## WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

Last in a seven-part series

August 4, 2019

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Mark 6:30–44 (CEB)

<sup>30</sup>The apostles returned to Jesus and told him everything they had done and taught. <sup>31</sup>Many people were coming and going, so there was no time to eat. He said to the apostles, “Come by yourselves to a secluded place and rest for a while.” <sup>32</sup>They departed in a boat by themselves for a deserted place.

<sup>33</sup>Many people saw them leaving and recognized them, so they ran ahead from all the cities and arrived before them. <sup>34</sup>When Jesus arrived and saw a large crowd, he had compassion on them because they were like sheep without a shepherd. Then he began to teach them many things.

<sup>35</sup>Late in the day, his disciples came to him and said, “This is an isolated place, and it’s already late in the day. <sup>36</sup>Send them away so that they can go to the surrounding countryside and villages and buy something to eat for themselves.”

<sup>37</sup>He replied, “You give them something to eat.”

But they said to him, “Should we go off and buy bread worth almost eight months’ pay and give it to them to eat?”

<sup>38</sup>He said to them, “How much bread do you have? Take a look.”

After checking, they said, “Five loaves of bread and two fish.”

<sup>39</sup>He directed the disciples to seat all the people in groups as though they were having a banquet on the green grass. <sup>40</sup>They sat down in groups of hundreds and fifties. <sup>41</sup>He took the five loaves and the two fish, looked up to heaven, blessed them, broke the loaves into pieces, and gave them to his disciples to set before the people. He also divided the two fish among them all. <sup>42</sup>Everyone ate until they were full. <sup>43</sup>They filled twelve baskets with the leftover pieces of bread and fish. <sup>44</sup>About five thousand had eaten.

*Jesus offers a banquet like no other.*

This is the last installment in this summer’s edition of *Kids’ Stories as Adults* and, not surprisingly, most of them have been spectacular stories involving “miracles” of one sort or another. Yes, those are quotation marks around “miracles.” If I were standing in front of you, I’d use air-quotes. For to be honest, I have a bit of problem with the notion of “miracles.” We use the word to convey an event in which God does something that seems impossible, something completely outside our understanding. I suppose that is ok so far as it goes. Like in today’s story – a few loaves and fishes and in minutes you’re feeding thousands. Yes . . . that is a miracle, lying far outside my understanding of what can happen in this world.

But there are at least two problems. First, it is a short step to believing that miracles such as these are the only way God acts in this world, that God is not really involved in all the day-to-day muck that constitutes the bulk of our lives. The truth about God is that he is deeply involved in our world and in our lives, not just in those spectacular moments. Indeed, most of the time God seems to work through us, not apart from us.

Second, God is often reduced to a “God of the gaps” – a way of accounting for what we can’t understand. And as we understand more and more, the gap gets smaller and smaller, leaving less room for God in many people’s minds. The truth is that much of what happens around us each day would be a miracle to everyone in the first-century.

So, let’s come to this story and learn more about how God works in this world.

### *The basics*

The basics of the story are simple. A huge and hungry crowd is gathered on the Galilean hillside. Having only five loaves of bread and two fish, Jesus blesses and

miraculously multiplies the food so it is sufficient to feed perhaps 20,000 people with food left over! (Note – though the story is often referred to as the “feeding of the five thousand,” the figure refers only to the men in the crowd, so 20,000 is a reasonable estimate.)

Of all the miracles recounted in the gospels, this is the only miracle that appears in all four gospels. As we’d expect, each gospel writer tells the story a little differently. John tells us that a boy brought forward the few loaves and fishes. More than the others, John’s telling of the meal evokes memories of the Exodus and of Jesus’ last meal with his disciples. Matthew brings out Jesus’ healing and compassion. More explicitly than the others, Luke ties together the disciples’ mission to build the kingdom and the power of Jesus’ work with the crowds. This is how it is with the gospel accounts. Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John may all work with the same material, but each uses it to paint a distinctive portrait of Jesus.

### *Mark’s story*

After John the Baptist is beheaded by Herod (Mark 6:14-19, immediately preceding the story of the “miracle meal”), the crowds press Jesus and his disciples ever harder. There are so many of them, so much need. It becomes such a crush that Jesus and the disciples leave and head for a solitary place. But, of course, the crowds find them again. When Jesus sees the large throng, he has compassion for them. As he puts it, they are like sheep without a shepherd . . . so Jesus sits down and begins to teach.

Late in the day, the disciples come to Jesus, pointing out that they are out in the middle of nowhere and it is time for everyone to head off and find something to eat in the nearby villages. But Jesus says no; everyone can stay. The disciples are to give everyone something to eat. I imagine they looked at one another in exasperation, wondering just how they were to accomplish such a task. It would be impossible. Just paying for the food would take more than six months’ wages. Are they really supposed to take such a vast sum in order to make one meal for these people?

Jesus then asks them to look around and see how much they really have. Only five loaves of bread and two fish can be found. Nonetheless, Jesus tells the disciples to have everyone sit down in groups of fifty or a hundred.

### Two Banquets

A key to reading the Bible well is to always look for the context. Put the verse in the paragraph, the paragraph in the immediate story, and then put the story in the context of the stories around it. For example, Mark puts two banquet stories side-by-side: Herod’s banquet (Mark 6:14-29) and the feeding of the thousands (6:30-44). Herod’s banquet ends in death; Jesus’ banquet ends in abundance.

John the Baptist was Jesus’ cousin. Herod had arrested John and thrown him in prison to shut him up, for John had condemned Herod’s incestuous relationship with Herodias, his niece and his brother’s wife. (What a family tree that must have been!)

Herod wants John dead but fears the consequences of an execution; he knows that John the Baptist enjoys popular support. However, on Herod’s birthday, there is a huge banquet. Herodias’ daughter dances for the king and Herod is so taken with her (yes, we are supposed to grasp the decadence in all this!) that he grants her a wish, any wish. The girl asks for the head of John the Baptist on a platter . . . and Herod delivers. After Jesus’ disciples claim John’s body and bury it, Jesus withdraws to a boat to be alone.

By putting these stories side-by-side, Mark draws a stark contrast between the rotten empire of Caesar and the life-giving empire of Christ. Caesar and all his minions, like Herod, may believe and proclaim that Caesar is Lord, but it is a lie. There is only one Lord, Jesus Christ, and only one kingdom, God’s. Caesar may have the power to kill John the Baptist, but it is a power that destroys, not creates. Jesus, the true Lord and Savior, has the power to create where there is nothing, to offer abundance where there is emptiness. In Caesar, lies death. In Christ, lies life.

Jesus looks to heaven, blesses the food, hands it to his disciples . . . and Jesus is not referred to again in this story.

Yes, it is Jesus who takes the bread, blesses it, breaks it, and multiplies it . . . but it is the disciples who actually distribute the food, feed the crowds, and collect the leftovers. Jesus is the power behind the feeding, but the disciples are the ones who do the work. Jesus doesn't wave a magic wand over the crowd so that hungry tummies will be magically full. This is why the miraculous feeding is in all four gospels . . . the entire story is a metaphor for how Jesus will work. Others will do Jesus' work, during his ministry and after his death. Jesus is teaching his disciples what his ministry is all about. He doesn't just tell them, he shows them. The work of building God's kingdom will be done through disciples, then and now.

### *Sharing the miracle*

From God's choosing of Abraham to the feeding of the thousands to the work of Seven Loaves food pantry or the medical clinic in Costa Rica or the new spaces for children and students, it has always been this way. God is not a god-of-the-magic-wand. God's purposes are worked out through us, not despite us. Jesus reminds his disciples that they are to be the light of the world. He sends them out to proclaim the kingdom of God and to heal the sick (Mark 6:6b-13). He shows his disciples how this works by handing them the loaves and having them distribute the food. If the crowds are going to get fed, the disciples are going to have to do it. They can't sit around hoping and praying that Jesus will do it for them. The disciples know whose power is at work, but they are also learning that their own hands better get busy.

Why is it this way? Why doesn't God simply wave a wand? Because God is love and we have been created so that we might love God and one another. This love is not mere sentiment or feeling, this love is manifested in our compassion, our caring, our service, and our sacrifice. Such are the demands of love.

### Reflections from N. T. Wright on the Miraculous Feeding

(from Wright's commentary, *Mark for Everyone*)

Perhaps the most obvious question that presses upon us today as we read this story is: it was all very well for the five thousand, but what about us today? Wasn't it a bit odd for Jesus to feed them (they could after all have gone and bought food) but not to feed the millions in our own world who wait with big, round eyes, and big, round stomachs at food distribution centers (if they're lucky), making guest appearances on our television screens and charity posters, and in our consciences? What about them? If God could do it then, why doesn't he do it now?

One obvious answer is what Jesus said to the disciples: you give them something to eat. But the question deserves more than that. It comes out of an assumption which itself needs challenging. What we call Jesus' 'miracles' were not done as acts of supernatural power, in order to show that there was a God who had such power, who was operating through Jesus, and who could (if he chose) solve all problems with a snap of the conjurer's fingers. The mighty acts of Jesus were not that sort of thing at all. They were about the breaking in of God's kingdom in and through Jesus, a complex event which would reach its full climax in his death and resurrection. From that point there would go out into all the world the power of new creation; but it would always have to struggle against the still-resistant forces of evil.

If, then, we repeat Jesus' command ('You give them something to eat') that doesn't just mean 'work a bit harder at famine relief,' though that would certainly help. It will also mean that those who discover the living God in and through Jesus must be prepared to face up to the evil structures and powers that still dominate and control so much of God's world, and to challenge them in the name of Jesus and with the power of his victory on the cross. It isn't just a matter of 'he did supernatural things, so why shouldn't we?' It's a matter of the full achievement of Jesus, of which these strange acts were just a part and a signpost, being brought to bear, through prayer and faithful action, on the world that still waits for the kingdom.

William Wilberforce did it with slavery (it took him an entire lifetime, too); who will do it with world poverty and starvation?

## Daily Bible Readings

*More on some biblical banquets*

**Monday, Genesis 18:1-15** Abraham puts on a feast for some unexpected guests.

**Tuesday, Esther 1** The Persian king puts on a great feast and is stood up by his wife.

**Wednesday, Daniel 5** The king and his guest are in a for a big surprise.

**Thursday, Luke 14:15-24** Jesus' parable about a great banquet

**Friday, John 6:1-15** John's telling of the feeding of 5000

**Saturday, Mark 8:1-10** Mark tells the story of a second meal for thousands.

## Scott Engle's Bible Classes

### Monday Evening Class

We are studying key portions of Isaiah.

Meets from 7:00 to 8:15 in Piro Hall

Beginning August 19: A study of the book of Revelation

### Tuesday Lunchtime Class

We are studying the parables of Jesus.

Meets from 11:45 to 1:00 in Piro Hall

Beginning August 20: A study of Paul's letter to the Romans

*About the weekday classes:*

Join us whenever you can. Each week's lesson stands on its own. This is very "drop-in." Bring something to eat if you like. Bring a study Bible.

On occasion Scott must cancel class, so if you are coming for the first time, you can check [www.scottengle.org](http://www.scottengle.org) to make sure the class is meeting.

### Scott's 11:00 Sunday Class in Smith Worship Center

This is a large, lecture-oriented class open to all ages.

Video of each week's class is posted here: [vimeo.com/groups/scottsbiblestudy](https://vimeo.com/groups/scottsbiblestudy)

Current series: *Amazing Stories*

Beginning August 11: *How the West Was Won: from Pagan to Christian*