

Text: John 6:1-15

Title: "Believe because Jesus fed 5000 families with 5 loaves and 2 fish"

Time: 8/18/2024 am

Place: NBBC

Introduction: The Golan Heights is a mountainous wilderness northeast of the Sea of Galilee, which Israel seized during the Six-Day War of 1967 from Syria. Since then, the territory has been a disputed source of tension between Israel, Syria, and the United Nations, which has condemned Israel for occupying the Heights. In 1973 Syria tried to retake the territory, but failed, and today Israel sees its occupation as strategically important in its defense against Syria's close ally Iran.

In 2019, the Trump administration led the United States for the first time to recognize Israeli sovereignty over the Golan Heights. They voted against the United Nations resolution against Israel. Today, media reports of tensions between Iran and Israel put the 50,000 scattered residents of this wilderness in danger of conflict once again.

Our Gospel account of the feeding of the five thousand takes place in this region. In Jesus's day, Israel was subdued by Rome. There was no Iranian threat, only the Roman one. One of Rome's puppet kings, Herod Antipas, had established the city of Tiberias on the western shore of the Sea of Galilee in honor of Tiberius Caesar, which name came to be used of the lake as well as the of the city (v. 1). The Gospel of Luke tells us that this feeding happened in a district then called Bethsaida Julias in Gaulonitis.

Political tensions in this region were as real in Jesus's day as they are in our day. This region northeast of the sea was beyond the reach of Herod, who not long before had murdered John the Baptist while feasting with his fellow royals, and

who wanted to meet Jesus, fearing that He was John the Baptist risen from the dead (Mark 6:14-16).

Unattracted to such a potentiality for obvious reasons, Jesus seeks simply to get to a quiet place with His disciples to be at peace and to rest for a time (v. 3; Mark 6:31, "And he said to them [Jesus to His disciples], 'Come away by yourselves to a desolate place and rest a while'").

The account tells us that the Passover was near (v. 4). Lightfoot notes that the fifteen days prior to the feast of Passover were days of intense preparation, during which public business ceased. This likely explains why 5,000 families were available on this occasion to disturb Jesus's rest and to seek more healings (v.2).

As 5,000 families, the crowd likely numbered in total around 20,000 men, women, and children. Attendance at a Donald Trump campaign rally has nothing on this crowd following the Lord Jesus that day in the Golan Heights.

John gives us some details of this day, which the other Gospels do not, especially the question that the Lord poses to Philip early in the day as the crowd was first gathering (vv. 5-6). Later in the day, the synoptics tell us, the disciples asked Jesus to send the hungry crowd away so that they could feed themselves. Jesus tells them to give the crowd something to eat. They repeat Philip's point from earlier that two hundred denarii, \$30,000 or so in today's money, would fall short of feeding such a crowd just a little. And then Jesus asks them, "How many loaves do you have? Go and see" (Mark 6:38).

After the disciples checked around, only Andrew comes back with a find. A young boy had five loaves and two fish. John tells us that the loaves were barley loaves, the bread of the poor, and the word he uses for *fish* indicates that they were a kind of seafood sandwich meat, kind of like a couple of

packages of sardines. This poor boy's lunch was enough, however, and no one went home hungry after the Creator of all the barley and all the fish in the world, took these seven creations of His and miraculously multiplied them until twelve baskets of barley loaves and sardines were left over.

By this time on a Sunday morning, your stomach may be reminding you that lunch is approaching, but in the end our passage is not about food. Like the rest of the Gospel of John, our passage is about our need to believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and believing to have life in His name (John 20:31). In our passage, the feeding of the five thousand teaches us that we must believe because Jesus fed 5,000 families with 5 loaves and 2 fish. And He made it look easy.

As we read the rest of the chapter, however, we find that creating this faith in the lives of those who ate His food that day was less easy somehow. By the chapter's end, the crowd will be gone, looking to follow Him no more. Evidently, it was less easy to fill the hearts of a crowd with saving faith than it was to fill their stomachs with enough food.

It is the way that Jesus seeks to fill the hearts of sinners with saving faith that John wants us to focus on as we read the sixth chapter of his Gospel. Notice some things Jesus does with His goal of producing faith in the hearts of the crowd.

I. Jesus lifts up His eyes with the goal of filling hearts with saving faith (vv. 1-5a).

Illustration: A week ago, I had the joy of a visit with my 83-year-old dad in South Carolina. I enjoy those trips in part because I get to see my dad, but also because it can be a time of rest from ministry responsibility. Prior to leaving, my New Testament reading was in Mark, and I came across the parallel passage in Mark 6 that tells us that Jesus first went to the

Golan Heights with his disciples to get to a secluded place and to rest awhile.

Application: It turns out, of course, that the place became anything but secluded, and what the Father had planned for His Son and His disciples that day was anything but restful.

This rigorous gospel work of the day begins with Jesus lifting up His eyes and seeing the crowd. This is the same phrase John uses to describe Jesus at the well of Sychar in chapter 4, as the Samaritans approached Him. There we read His instruction to His disciples to lift up their eyes and see: "Do you not say, 'There are yet four months, then comes the harvest?' Look, I tell you, lift up your eyes, and see that the fields are white for harvest" (4:35). Many Samaritans were saved as Jesus "lifted up" His eyes this way.

He does the same here as the Galilean crowd approached (v. 5a). The accounts in Matthew and Mark tell us what He saw when He lifted up His eyes. They say He was moved with compassion on the crowd because He saw that they were like sheep who had no shepherd (Matt. 14:14, Mark 6:34).

This is where the goal of filling hearts with saving faith always begins. Jesus seeks to teach us what He taught His disciples. We must lift up our eyes from our personal schedule for the day, from our work responsibilities, from our recreational activities, from our checkbooks, and even from our intense Bible study, and see what Jesus saw.

We must see all about us needy sheep that have no shepherd. We must be moved with compassion on them. We must trust that they are white already to harvest. We must commit our schedules, our work responsibilities, our recreational activities, our checkbooks, and our Bible study to be faithful laborers in that harvest field. Jesus lifts up His eyes with the goal of filling hearts with saving faith. So must we.

II. Jesus tests His servants with the goal of filling hearts with saving faith (vv. 5b-13).

Illustration: I graduated from college in 1986. That year the average GPA of Harvard graduates was 3.21 on a 4.0 scale. It is now 3.8. Aden Barton wrote an article about this in the *Harvard Crimson* newspaper citing what he called “grade inflation.” The article begins with this quotation from one of the school’s educational committees: “Grades A and B are sometimes given too readily – Grade A for work of no very high merit, and Grade B for work not far above mediocrity ... One of the chief obstacles to raising the standards of the degree is the readiness with which insincere students gain passable grades by sham work.”

The author of the article then points out that the quotation comes from a committee report issued in 1894, when the average GPA at the school was 2.4. The article concludes, “Grade [inflation] ultimately perverts the liberal arts education, which should center on risk-taking and pushing oneself intellectually instead of sheltering in ‘easy-A’ classes” [[thecrimson.com/article/2022/10/3/barton-grade-inflation](https://thecrimson.com/article/2022/10/3/barton-grade-inflation)].

Application: The Lord believes in testing His disciples, and He always grades fairly without grade inflation. There are no “easy-A” classes in His schoolroom of growth in grace. In fact, earning an A can be most difficult, but His purposes are accomplished in us even when we fail His tests.

Here Jesus gives Philip a test that requires his trust, and He gives all the disciples that day a test that required their obedience. Imagine telling 20,000 hungry people to sit down for supper without any food at hand to give to them. And yet, that is exactly what the disciples did in obedience to Christ.

Verse 11 says literally, “Therefore, Jesus took the loaves, and giving thanks (an important lesson for our meals, by the way)

He distributed them.” He did the same with the fish. The *therefore* of this verse tells us why Jesus chose to feed 20,000 people with a miracle. It was because the disciples passed the test. They walked by faith, not by sight. They obeyed without any guarantee that their obedience would be worth it except the promise of God. Like Noah building an ark where there was no sea and where it had never rained, these disciples prepared people to eat a meal that seemed impossible. And the Lord’s reward in the end was twelve full baskets, one for each of His servers that day. What a thrill it is to pass the Lord’s test, find out how trustworthy He is, and receive His reward.

So, what impossible thing has the Lord told us to do that seems the fool’s errand? What tests of faith and obedience has He asked us to pass? Will we trust Him? Will we simply obey Him? Or will we take matters into our own hands, tell the Lord that we have concluded that He does not know what He is doing, and venture on a different course? If we were the disciples, would we have sent the crowd away? Jesus tests His servants with the goal of filling hearts with saving faith. We must pass these tests if we want to be used by Him as He accomplishes that goal.

III. Jesus withdraws to the mountains with the goal of filling hearts with saving faith (vv. 14-15).

Illustration: The Trump, Kennedy, and Harris campaigns would welcome the endorsement of Jesus, were He and His crowd here today. In terms of the politics of that day, what the crowd believed the cause of freedom needed was Jesus to accept their offer to make Him a king who would be guaranteed their support to throw off the tyranny of Rome and restore their nation to its rightful place as a free people. The political longing of an oppressed people had found their man, and the patriotism of the Passover season only heightened their desire to see Jesus become their king.

Application: But as important as that cause may have been, Jesus withdraws to the mountains with the goal of filling hearts with saving faith. The synoptics tell us He withdrew alone specifically to pray. The Father answered His prayers by directing Him later in the chapter to become a complete political failure in terms of winning the support of this crowd. But in His first coming, Jesus was not sent to conquer Rome. He came to seek and to save those who are lost.

We gather this morning as the people of God with a dual citizenship. On the one hand, we are American citizens in a country where God has ordained a government of the people, by the people, and for the people. We must be faithful to the Lord in our voting responsibility, in our seeking the peace and prosperity of our nation, in communicating with our representatives, and in running for political office in order to make our nation a better place.

On the other hand, we are citizens of heaven in a kingdom that is not of this world, where Christ has told us to take up our cross and to follow Him as members of His local churches. He has not ordained that we be a nation of the churches, by the churches, and for the churches. Our mission as members of churches is the mission of the cross. It is the mission of withdrawing from political opportunities to pray. It is the mission of filling hearts, on both the left and the right of the political divide, with saving faith.

This is our dual citizenship. Let's be faithful to both responsibilities as God's people today. Let's engage in politics as American citizens, but let's withdraw from politics when we come to church, seeking only to fill hearts with saving faith.

Conclusion: The miracle of this chapter is glorious, but everyone who ate the barley loaves and fish that evening became hungry again the next morning. Tragically, not one of them awakened with a heart that was filled with saving faith.

Our Savior's instruction for us is clear. We must lift up our eyes with gospel compassion, we must pass our Savior's tests of faith and obedience against all odds as gospel servants, and we must withdraw to the mountain to pray as a local church committed to our gospel mission, not a social or a political agenda.

Gospel work is the hard work. It is the eternally consequential work. It is the work whose results will last forever, whether they be good results like in Acts 2, or bad results like in John 6. It is the work Jesus calls our church to do:

John 6:27 – "Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give to you. For on Him God the Father has set His seal."

John 6:29 – "This is the work of God, that you believe in Him whom He has sent."

"A man came—I think it was actually in Philadelphia—on one occasion to the great George Whitefield and asked if he might print his sermons. Whitefield gave this reply; he said, 'Well, I have no inherent objection, if you like, but you will never be able to put on the printed page the lightning and the thunder.' That is the distinction—the sermon, and the 'lightning and the thunder.' To Whitefield this was of very great importance, and it should be of very great importance to all preachers, as I hope to show. You can put the sermon into print, but not the lightning and the thunder. That comes into the act of preaching and cannot be conveyed by cold print. Indeed it almost baffles the descriptive powers of the best reporters."

—David Martin Lloyd-Jones,

*Preachers and Preaching*