

Main Idea: By feeding the five thousand in John 6:1-15, Jesus demonstrated what kind of Messiah He is and why you can trust Him fully. Simply put, He demonstrated His deity in four ways.

- I. Jesus prepared the place of the meal (1-4).
  - A. He went to the far shore (1-2).
  - B. He went to a mountain (3).
  - C. He went there at Passover (4).
- II. Jesus prepared the people for the meal (5-10).
  - A. He asked Philip for his input (5-7).
    1. He saw dollar signs.
    2. He saw a problem with no solution.
  - B. He received input from Andrew (8-9).
    1. He brought what he could find to Jesus.
    2. He knew what he had wasn't enough.
  - C. He instructed the people to sit down (10).
    1. He's a God of order.
    2. He knows that hungry people need more than food.
- III. Jesus prepared the food for the meal (11-13).
  - A. He gave thanks for the food.
  - B. He multiplied the food.
  - C. He satisfied the people with as much food as they wanted.
  - D. He had the disciples collect the leftover food.
    1. He taught them about waste.
    2. He taught them about His sufficiency.
- IV. Jesus prepared for the cross following the meal (14-15).
  - A. Jesus knew the crowd's agenda.
  - B. Jesus operated by His Father's agenda.
    1. It's why He went to the mountain.
    2. It's why He later went to another mountain.

The Bottom Line: There is no one else like Jesus.

What's the most memorable meal you've ever eaten? For me, several come to mind, in no particular order. I think of the first meal I ever ate as a married man. Sherry and I had cake and punch at our wedding reception, so that doesn't count as a meal. It was later that evening that we stopped at a steakhouse after leaving the church. The food wasn't so memorable, but the day sure was.

I think of a pig roast in the jungles of Papua New Guinea. The Angors roasted the pig in a pit for I don't know how many hours. It was quite an honor to participate in their celebration. A banana leaf served as my plate. I'm not sure which part of the pig I got.

That brings to mind another meal, one I ate in a village home in the Odessa region of Ukraine. I was with a good pastor friend, Frank, and our good Ukrainian brother, Vasily, in the home of a very generous Ukrainian sister in Christ. She put her best on the table in front of us, which we appreciated. The problem was, we weren't sure what the meat was. When Frank asked, our hostess barked. We stopped eating. “Dog?” Frank asked hesitantly. “No, duck,” was the reply, much to our relief.

It's interesting, but my most memorable meals weren't eaten alone. The company is always a big part of the memory.

This morning we're going to investigate the account of a very special meal in the Bible, indeed, a meal like none other, and that's no exaggeration. It's called “The Feeding of the Five Thousand,” and it has to rank as one of the most unforgettable miracles Jesus ever performed.

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\*\* Note: This is an unedited manuscript of a message preached at Wheelersburg Baptist Church. It is provided to prompt your continued reflection on the practical truths of the Word of God.

This is the one miracle, besides the resurrection account, that appears in all four Gospels.<sup>1</sup> It's the only miracle, in addition to the resurrection, that appears in Matthew, Mark, and Luke that John saw fit to repeat yet a fourth time.

You know the story. Jesus took five small loaves of bread and two little fish, multiplied them, and miraculously fed a multitude of five thousand hungry men, plus women and children. Astounding.

Of course, our amazement ought to raise a question for us, one that Augustine posed centuries ago. Why does Jesus' feeding five thousand astound us, yet we hardly even think about the fact that He provides food for a planet full of people every day? Augustine said, "For certainly the government of the whole world is a greater miracle than the satisfying of five thousand men with five loaves; and yet no man wonders at the former; but the latter men wonder at, not because it is greater, but because it is rare. For who even now feeds the whole world, but He who creates the cornfield from a few grains?"<sup>2</sup>

Well said. So feeding the five thousand isn't at the top of His resume. But it's certainly memorable, and instructional.

What's the point of this miracle? It's the point of every miracle John records in this book. "But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name (John 20:31)."

Jesus can give you life, says John, *eternal life*. He can do it because He's the Christ, the Son of God.

Prove it, says the skeptic. How can I know for sure your claim is true? Is there evidence? Has this Jesus done anything to prove His identity and warrant my trust and devotion?

Let me show you what He did for a multitude of people one day, says John. Let me tell you about the day He put His deity on display in front of thousands.

Let's take a look, my friend. When Jesus fed the five thousand, as recorded in John 6:1-15, He demonstrated in no uncertain terms what kind of Messiah He is and why you can trust Him fully. Simply put, in the four scenes of the story Jesus demonstrated His deity in four ways.

#### I. Scene #1: Jesus prepared the place of the meal (1-4).

Our story begins in verse 1, "Some time after this." John doesn't specify how much time elapsed. If you look at a Harmony of the Four Gospels, you'll notice that between John 5 and John 6 are the events found in Matthew 12-13, Mark 2-6, and Luke 6-9. Jesus has been doing miracles around the Galilee region and teaching in parables about the kingdom of heaven. Hendriksen says there's a gap of six months to a year between the events of chapter five and chapter six. He places the setting at April of AD 29, about a year before Christ's death.<sup>3</sup>

An important shift occurs in John 6. The focus of Jesus' ministry begins to move from His public to His private ministry with the twelve. Ultimately, that shift is related to His purpose for coming, but it's also tied to the response of the people. In John 5 we saw Jesus being rejected in Judea (5:18). In John 6 we'll see Him experience rejection in Galilee (6:66). Hendriksen explains, "The account of this double rejection is necessary in order to furnish a background for the next few chapters, in the sense that it causes the

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<sup>1</sup> Observation by Morris, p. 338.

<sup>2</sup> Augustine, quote taken from Morris, p. 339, footnote 1.

<sup>3</sup> Hendriksen, p. 216.

tender love of the Savior to stand out sharply against the background of human ingratitude.”<sup>4</sup>

As we begin chapter 6 we find Jesus at work preparing for the big meal. In scene one He prepares the place for the meal, and He did so by doing three things.

**A. He went to the far shore (1-2).** “Some time after this, Jesus crossed to the far shore of the Sea of Galilee (that is, the Sea of Tiberias), and a great crowd of people followed him because they saw the miraculous signs he had performed on the sick.”

As our story begins we see Jesus on the move. Jesus never reacted to situations. He always moved with intentionality. In this case, says John, He *crossed to the far shore* of the Sea of Galilee. Why the move? In the parallel account of Mark 6:31 we learn that Jesus had just told His men, “Come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest.”

Why did they need rest? By looking at the other accounts we learn the feeding of the five thousand happened right after three significant events.<sup>5</sup> One, it’s right after the Twelve have returned from their first mission in which Jesus sent them out two by two to cast out demons and preach all over Galilee. Two, it’s right after John the Baptist was killed by King Herod. And three, it’s right about the time that Herod expressed a desire to see Jesus, and particularly to see His miracles.

That’s the context. The disciples are tired and needing a break, not to mention a time for debriefing following the completion of their first mission. So they headed for a solitary place.

But the down time never occurred. John says that *a great crowd of people were following Jesus*. And don’t miss why. It’s because of the miracles they saw Him doing (note: the verb tense indicates they were following Him because they were seeing Him do miracles continuously, again and again).

Keep that in mind for what follows. This isn’t a crowd that loves Jesus for Jesus’ sake. These are thrill seekers that want to use Jesus. They’re not following Him to learn, but to see. And once they stop seeing what they want to see, they’ll start leaving (see 6:66).

Having said that, please know that Jesus is in perfect control of the situation. He knows what the crowd is doing. As He heads for the far shore, He knows they’ll follow Him, and right on schedule. What’s the point of preparing a magnificent meal if there are no people to enjoy it?

Where did He end up? John just says “to the far shore of the Sea of Galilee” (and then provides another name, “the Sea of Tiberias”). Luke is more specific. According to Luke 9:10 Jesus took His men to Bethsaida, which means “House of Fish.” There were apparently two Bethsaida’s. This one was known as Bethsaida Julias, a town on the northeast corner of the Sea of Galilee close to where the Jordan River enters the lake. Bethsaida was Philip’s hometown (John 1:44) which will prove significant momentarily.

Jesus did something else to prepare the place of the meal. After going to the far shore...

**B. He went to a mountain (3).** “Then Jesus went up on a mountainside and sat down with his disciples.” Remember, that’s the initial point of this trip, to get some rest and personal time with the Twelve.

A lot of important things in Jesus’ ministry happened on a mountain, as MacArthur points out. Part of His temptation did (Matt. 4:8). He preached His most famous sermon

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<sup>4</sup> Hendriksen, p. 216.

<sup>5</sup> Observation by G. Campbell Morgan, p. 96.

on one, the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5-7). He chose the Twelve on a mountain (Mark 3:13). Mountains provide the setting for His transfiguration (Matt. 17:1), the Olivet Discourse (Matt. 24:3), His post-resurrection meeting with the disciples (Matt. 28:16), and His ascension (Acts 1:12).<sup>6</sup>

What happened on this mountain? Apparently took a seat with the Twelve, but their staff retreat came to an abrupt end as a crowd showed up.

How did Jesus respond when He saw the crowd? Keep in mind He took His men there to rest. Did He tell them to leave? No, Mark 6:34 says, “When Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd.” Luke says, “He welcomed them and spoke to them about the kingdom of God, and healed those who needed healing (Luke 9:11).”

So what was intended as a retreat turned into another ministry day for Jesus. According to the other accounts, Jesus actually spent the entire day teaching this crowd. The meal came at the end.

The Lord did a third thing to prepare the place for the meal. Notice the time indicator in verse 4, “The Jewish Passover Feast was near.” That’s interesting.

**C. He went there at Passover (4).** “The Passover was *at hand*,” says the ESV. Passover was a big deal for the Jews, the biggest of their yearly celebrations. Most tried to make it to Jerusalem for the event, and that may be why the crowd is so large here. These are pilgrims on their way to observe Passover.<sup>7</sup>

So the place is set. Jesus traveled to an out of the way spot, far from any grocery store or restaurant, for sure. He did so at a time when multitudes of people were on the road, and not surprisingly, a crowd showed up wanting still more from Him.

Don’t miss Jesus’ sovereignty in this. As with any meal, a big part is preparation. Jesus prepared the place for the meal.

By the way, keep that in mind when the unexpected enters your life. The unexpected visitor. The unexpected illness. The unexpected work assignment. It’s not unexpected to your Savior, and He may well be preparing something magnificent for you to see.

## II. Scene #2: Jesus prepared the people for the meal (5-10).

Here’s how He did it. First...

**A. He asked Philip for his input (5-7).** Verse 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?’”

Hmmm. Why Philip? Why didn’t Jesus ask one of the others? We first meet Philip back in chapter one where we’re told that Jesus found him the day after He called Peter and Andrew. The Lord approached Philip and said to him, “Follow me (1:43).” It’s worth noting that the first thing Philip did after that was to find Nathanael and tell him, “We have found the one Moses wrote about in the Law, and about whom the prophets also wrote—Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph.”

We’re told one other important piece of info about Philip in chapter one. Verse 44 states, “Philip, like Andrew and Peter, was from the town of Bethsaida.” Maybe that’s why Jesus asked Philip where to buy food. He’s from *Bethsaida*, which means he knows the local grocery stores.

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<sup>6</sup> John MacArthur, p. 221.

<sup>7</sup> John emphasizes the importance of the Jewish Feasts, including Passover, in His Gospel. In 2:13 he notes that Jesus went to Jerusalem for Passover. In 5:1 he shows Jesus heading to Jerusalem “for a feast of the Jews.” In 7:2 he mentions the Feast of Tabernacles which Jesus likewise observed in Jerusalem.

“What’s your suggestion, Philip? Where can we buy bread for these people?” Of course, the question wasn’t for information sake, as verse 6 makes clear, “He asked this only to test him, for he already had in mind what he was going to do.”

That’s significant. Though the meal is going to benefit the crowd, it’s primarily for the benefit of the disciples. Jesus is creating a teachable moment to prepare them for a life of ministering for Him.

Specifically, He’s giving Philip (and the others who no doubt will learn from this) a test. That’s how Jesus trains a disciple, including us. He puts us in situations that reveal what we really think about Him, about ourselves, and about life itself. He *tests* us.

Again, Jesus knows what He’s going to do, a point John emphasizes. *He already had in mind what He was going to do.* Jesus doesn’t react to situations, then or now. He orchestrates them.

Verse 7—“Philip answered him, ‘Eight months’ wages would not buy enough bread for each one to have a bite!’” That’s so revealing. Notice Philip’s perspective on the situation.

1. *He saw dollar signs.* Jesus asked *where*, not *how much*. But Philip can’t get beyond the *how much* question. “Jesus, are you serious? It would cost two hundred denarii [that’s what the original text says] to feed this crowd, and we don’t have that kind of cash.”

Of course, he was right. A denarius equaled one day’s wages for the common laborer. This will cost two hundred days of labor to pay for, *eight months’ wages*, and that’s just to put a bite of bread in each person’s mouth!

We can’t afford that! says Philip. As one commentator put it, “Rather than focusing on Jesus, Philip’s mental computer began to work like a cash register, and all he could think about was the total cash that would be needed to provide just a little bread for each person.”<sup>8</sup> But it’s not just dollar signs that Philip saw.

2. *He saw a problem with no solution.* By the way, how would you have responded to Jesus’ question? I think I’d be saying, “Why do we even need to feed these people, Jesus? We didn’t invite them. It’s not our problem they didn’t plan a little better and pack for the trip, is it?”

To the natural man, a crowd of hungry people is one big problem, and for Philip, one big problem with no solution in sight. At this point...

**B. He received input from Andrew (8-9).** Notice verses 8-9, “Another of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter’s brother, spoke up, ‘Here is a boy with five small barley loaves and two small fish, but how far will they go among so many?’”

It doesn’t say that Andrew’s input was solicited. He too was from Bethsaida, and apparently he overheard Jesus’ question and Philip’s non-answer. So he proceeded to do two things. First...

1. *He brought what he could find to Jesus.* Which was a boy (the Greek *paidarion* stresses that he was a “young child,” a “lad”) and his sack lunch. John indicates that Andrew actually brought the boy to Jesus with the food.

It consisted of five loaves of bread—John’s Gospel alone mentions that it’s barley bread. And two little fish—the synoptic accounts use the word *ichthus* for “fish,” but John uses a different word (*opsarion*) which stresses that these were small fish.

In that day barley bread was the cheapest of all bread, and here it indicates this boy was poor. The particular fish he had, according to Barclay, were no bigger than sardines. “Pickled fish from Galilee,” says Barclay, “were known all over the Roman Empire. In

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<sup>8</sup> Gerald Borchert, quote taken from MacArthur, p. 223.

those days fresh fish was an unheard of luxury, for there was no means of transporting it any distance and keeping it in an eatable condition. Small sardine-like fish swarmed in the Sea of Galilee. They were caught and pickled and made into a kind of savoury. The boy had his little pickled fish to help the dry barley bread down.”<sup>9</sup>

So that’s what Andrew brought to Jesus. I chuckle at Hendriksen’s comment, “Andrew must have used some pretty persuasive language to deprive this boy of his lunch.”<sup>10</sup> I wonder what he was thinking. I get the sense that, unlike Philip who saw only dollar signs, Andrew seems to believe that Jesus could do something with this lunch. Of course...

2. *He knew what he had wasn’t enough.* But perhaps he also was learning that when we place what we have in Jesus’ hands, the unexplainable begins to happen.

We just finished the year as a church in the black, with the economy as it is. You say, “Explain that.” I can’t. I just know that when you by faith bring what little you have to Jesus, the unexplainable happens.

But there’s one more thing Jesus did to prepare the people for the meal, namely...

**C. He instructed the people to sit down (10).** That’s verse 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.”

The reason there’s plenty of grass is because it’s springtime. In the coming summer months this grass will wither under the scorching sun. How kind of the Savior to pick the perfect time and provide a comfortable place to dine!

But why have them sit? The fact is, Jesus didn’t need them sitting in order to perform this miracle. He could have just made the food and passed it out to the hungry masses milling around. But no, John says He had them *sit down*, and Mark’s account specifies He made them sit in groups of hundreds and fifties (Mark 6:40). Why this arrangement? Let me suggest, for starters, it’s because...

1. *He’s a God of order.* He’s not into chaos and confusion. 1 Corinthians 14:40 says, “But everything should be done in a fitting and orderly way.” By the way, on a practical note, what words describe your family mealtime: chaos and confusion, or fitting and orderly? Sadly, many families today don’t even eat together, let alone eat in an organized, peaceful, and God-honoring fashion.

But I think there’s a more fundamental reason for this seating arrangement.

2. *He knows that hungry people need more than food.* Suppose Jesus had just multiplied the food, with the people standing and milling around. Suppose He just fed them, with no organization. What would have happened?

“Where’d this food come from, Simon? Have you been hiding this in your backpack?”

These people don’t just need food. They need to know Jesus, and that’s what this miracle is all about. And by the time the meal is over, there will be no question as to its source.

### III. Scene #3: Jesus prepared the food for the meal (11-13).

Here’s how He did it. First...

**A. He gave thanks for the food.** Verse 11 says, “Jesus then took the loaves, *gave thanks.*” Literally, “having given thanks.” Don’t miss that. Before He fed the people He made it clear to them where their food came from. As Barclay observes, in so doing He

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<sup>9</sup> Barclay, pp. 202-3.

<sup>10</sup> Hendriksen, p. 221.

was acting like the father of a family. Dads, do you lead your family in giving thanks for God's provisions?

Here's the second step.

**B. He multiplied the food.** John says Jesus "took the loaves" and then "distributed" them. Somewhere between those two activities the miracle of multiplication occurred. Jesus didn't just make a huge pile of food all at once, either, but started breaking the bread and distributing it, piece by piece, until all were fed. I get the sense that every morsel of food that eventually made it into the mouths of the hungry multitude came through the hands of Jesus. Quite a picture, for sure.

Hendriksen explains, "Just as Jesus at Cana did not simply create wine, but changed water into wine, so here he does not just create bread, but changes bread into more bread."<sup>11</sup> See His abundant kindness in this, my friend. Jesus came to earth to turn little into much.

**C. He satisfied the people with as much food as they wanted.** Notice the phrase in verse 11, "as much as they wanted." That's how much bread Jesus provided. And verse 11 concludes, "He did the same with the fish."

G. Campbell Morgan remarked, "When Jesus gets down to business, it is not a snack that tantalizes, but a meal that satisfies."<sup>12</sup> And lest we miss the point, verse 12 begins, "When they had all had enough to eat." No one left hungry that day. Everybody had as much as they wanted.

On a side note, if Jesus repeated this miracle today, would the same be said of us? I wonder. "Only barley bread and fish? Where's the tartar sauce, and what about dessert?"

The last thing Jesus did at this meal is intriguing.

**D. He had the disciples collect the leftover food.** Verses 12-13—"When they had all had enough to eat, he said to his disciples, 'Gather the pieces that are left over. Let nothing be wasted.' So they gathered them and filled twelve baskets with the pieces of the five barley loaves left over by those who had eaten."

Pick up the leftovers, says Jesus. Every piece. What's He doing? He's teaching the people, isn't He? First...

1. *He taught them about waste.* Hendriksen is right, "Infinite resources are no excuse for waste. Wastefulness is sinfulness."<sup>13</sup> I fear we will give a sober accounting for our wastefulness, my friends. How much food have we wasted in life while millions are starving? How much water have poured down the drain? Not to mention how much spiritual food we've wasted by not coming to church with a teachable heart, or how much time we've squandered in the name of entertainment. "Let nothing be wasted," said our Master.

But there's another lesson here, this one particularly for the disciples.

2. *He taught them about His sufficiency.* How many baskets were filled?<sup>14</sup> Twelve. By how many disciples? Twelve. One basket for each man. There's tomorrow's meal for these men, and more importantly a lesson they'd never forget. No problem is too big for our Master.

It's worth noting that this is the fourth miraculous sign that John records to prove that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God. It also sets the stage for a sermon Jesus will give at

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<sup>11</sup> Hendriksen, p. 223.

<sup>12</sup> Morgan, p. 99.

<sup>13</sup> Hendriksen, p. 223.

<sup>14</sup> The term for "basket," *kophinos*, refers to a stiff wicker basket.

the end of this chapter in which He declares four times, “I am the bread of life (33, 41, 48, & 51).”

What are you facing today, my friend? What mountain of a need stands in your path? No need is too big for Him. Come to the One who can feed thousands with just a sack lunch. Is your soul hungry? Then come to Him who is the Bread of Life. If you have Jesus, beloved, you have all you need.

But wait. We don’t always know what we need. That’s what scene four is all about.

#### IV. Scene #4: Jesus prepared for the cross following the meal (14-15).

Notice verses 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.’”

Some skeptics have said that Jesus really didn’t do a miracle on that hillside. He just used the generosity of a boy with his lunch to get the rest of the stingy crowd to share their hidden lunches. But would that motivate this crowd to respond this way? Hardly. *He is the Prophet!* they said, referring to the Messianic prediction given by Moses.

This looks good, doesn’t it? These people really believe in Jesus now! Not so fast.

**A. Jesus knew the crowd’s agenda.** The story ends with these words in verse 15, “Jesus, knowing that they intended to come and make him king by force, withdrew again to a mountain by himself.”

There’s great irony in this, as Morris points out. “He who is already King has come to open His kingdom to men; but in their blindness men try to force Him to be the kind of king they want; thus they fail to get the king they want, and also lose the kingdom He offers.”<sup>15</sup>

You see, here are people who wanted a Messiah who would give them more of this world. They wanted physical stuff. They wanted an earthly deliverer who would give it to them.

But Jesus refuses to submit to their carnal desires. He doesn’t come to the sinner on the sinner’s terms, for He’s not interested merely in making sinners comfortable in their sin-cursed condition in this sin-cursed world.

My friend, Jesus didn’t come merely to rescue sinners from the problems of this life. He came to rescue sinners from themselves, namely, from their sin and the enslavement to self that sin has produced.

That’s why Jesus withdrew. He’s not giving in to this fickle crowd. He knows their short-sighted agenda and He loves them too much to succumb to it. But it’s not just His love for them that moves Him away.

#### **B. Jesus operated by His Father’s agenda.**

1. *It’s why He went to the mountain.* He’ll spend several hours there alone with His Father before coming down and walking on the water to His frightened disciples. And...

2. *It’s why He later went to another mountain.* The one in Jerusalem where He extended His arms to Roman soldiers. He’s a king, for sure, but a different kind of king, a king who came to die for His people, and then, three days later, to conquer the greatest foe of His people, death itself.

Here’s the bottom line, my friends. *There is no one else like Jesus.* Absolutely no one else. So believe in Him and have life!

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<sup>15</sup> Morris, pp. 346-7.