

Main Idea: In Mark 6:30-44 we meet the One who uses the unexpected to teach us about Himself. In this passage, the disciples learned about Jesus from two unexpected events. Twice they thought one thing was going to happen, but in both situations the Lord had something else in mind. He often does the same with us, as we’ll see.

- I. A retreat becomes an advance (30-34)
 - A. The apostles thought they were going to have Jesus all to themselves (30-31).
 - 1. They had finished their previous assignment (30).
 - 2. They needed a break (31).
 - B. Jesus ended up ministering to multitudes (32-34).
 - 1. The Lord doesn’t limit His compassion to us.
 - 2. The Lord cares for all who need a shepherd.
- II. A need becomes an opportunity (35-44)
 - A. The apostles saw a food shortage (35-36).
 - B. Jesus saw a teachable moment (37-44).
 - 1. Jesus wants to use us (37).
 - 2. Jesus wants to use what we have (38).
 - 3. Jesus wants us to be participants, not spectators (39-41).
 - 4. Jesus wants us to know that He alone can satisfy (42).
 - 5. Jesus wants us to know that little becomes much when given to Him (43-44).

Application: Three lessons to remember when the unexpected enters our lives...

- 1. What’s “Plan B” to us is “Plan A” to God.
- 2. When we don’t understand the unexpected, God does.
- 3. God’s plan is always about His glory and our good.

Jesus is the most amazing person in the universe, and we’re growing in our amazement through our ongoing series in Mark’s gospel, *The Servant in Action*. Today we’ll be in Mark 6:30-44 and we’ll learn how Jesus uses the unexpected to teach us about Himself.

Scripture Reading: Mark 6:30-44

There was an old IBM commercial with two businessmen sitting outside a restaurant. The cell phone of one of the men rings and he hears a work associate from the other side of the world telling him there’s been a change of plans in the work order. Then he tells him there’s been a change of plans in the timing of the work. Then he tells him there’s been a change of plans in the travel destination. And on and on it goes with change of plans after change of plans. Finally the fellow hangs up his cell phone, at which point the work associate who’s eating with him asks, “What’s up?” To which he replies nonchalantly, “The usual.”

The point of the advertisement, I suppose, was that if you had this particular product you’d be prepared when the unexpected hit you. Life is full of the unexpected, ranging from surprises at work, to pop quizzes at school, to doctor’s reports that catch us off guard, to broken appliances at home. We have our plans all set and then, whoosh!, all of a sudden something unexpected occurs and our plans go asunder.

You can find out very quickly what a person’s made of when the unexpected enters their life. Such was the case in Mark 6. In Mark 6:30-44 the disciples learned something very important about Jesus from two unexpected events. Twice they thought one thing was going to happen, but in both situations the Lord had something else in mind. He often does the same with us, as we’ll see.

^{**}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.

¹ For a previous look at this passage, see the Mark series in 2004.

I. A retreat becomes an advance (30-34)

Verse 7 gives the context for our story. There we see Jesus launching a new phase in His ministry, the phase of reproduction. He sent out the Twelve two by two and gave them authority to teach, heal, and cast out demons. That's what they did according to verses 12-13, going to village after village all over the Galilee region, telling people the good news about Jesus. How long were they gone? We're not told, perhaps weeks.

In verse 30 they return to Jesus for a debriefing session. "The apostles gathered around Jesus." Mark calls them, not "disciples" (which means "followers"), but *apostles* (a word that means "one sent"). The Twelve have now moved to the next level. Having followed Jesus for nearly two years, they're now "sent ones," His official representatives.

The end of verse 30 tells us the nature of this follow-up meeting. "The apostles returned to Jesus and told him all that they had done and taught." Their ministry was two-pronged. It included *words* and *works*. And the men told Jesus about both aspects. In fact, these twelve men told Jesus "all" they had done and taught. That included their success stories and blunders.

Keep in mind that these are young men (most in their twenties). They're in an internship of sorts, an apprentice program. So Jesus sent them out to get a taste of the work and now talks with them about how it went. Luke 9:10 says they "reported to Jesus what they had done."

Apparently, based on what happened next, they did a good job getting the word out about Jesus. Notice verse 31, particularly the end. "And he said to them, 'Come away by yourselves to a desolate place and rest a while.' *For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat.*"

A byproduct of effective ministry is...*more ministry opportunity!* You give one person God's hope-giving Word and that not only whets his appetite for more, but he spreads the word to his friends and they, too, want a taste.

The response was so overwhelming that the Twelve couldn't even stop to eat. Ministry is like that. It requires sacrifice. There's something more important than bread, Jesus once said. *Man shall not live by bread alone but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.* People need the Word more than bread, and when we have opportunity to give it to them we need to make the most of it. When was the last time you gave up eating for kingdom work? There is something more important than bread.

But that doesn't mean we don't need bread. Notice what Jesus did next, according to verse 31 (NIV), "He said to them, 'Come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest.'" Physical needs matter to the Lord. We need bread. We need rest. Without them we are in trouble. Vance Havner once said, "If you don't come apart and rest, you will come apart."

Another factor in this get-away was the changing political climate. Since Herod just murdered John the Baptist, it may have been necessary for Jesus and His men to be careful and "lie low" for awhile.

"Let's get away for awhile," Jesus told His men. Just you and Me. You need some rest. That was the plan...

A. The apostles thought they were going to have Jesus all to themselves (30-31).

1. *They'd finished their previous assignment (30).*
2. *They needed a break (31).* By the way, I find it interesting that Jesus didn't take the break for His own sake. He too had been working hard, but that's not the reason

for the suggested get-away. He had a work to do and was intent on finishing it. But His devotion to the task did not prevent Him from seeing the needs of those near Him.

Interestingly, a similar thing occurred back in 3:20. There such a large crowd came to Jesus that He and His men couldn't eat, but He didn't initiate a retreat that time, even though His family members tried to force Him to do so, saying, "He's out of His mind."

Balance is needed, of course, and most of us struggle to keep that balance. There's a time to work and there's a time to get away. Some don't know the joy that comes from putting their shoulder to the plough, and *staying there* until the work of God is done. They're not interested in participating firsthand in God's great work. They prefer to stay in their comfort zone, safe and secure in their tiny world. They're missing out, of course.

On the other hand, some pride themselves in living on the front lines. They act as if they're invincible, viewing time off as a sign of weakness. But even soldiers need to leave the battle zone every once in awhile.

Some years ago a young man approached the foreman of a logging crew and asked for a job. "That depends," replied the foreman. "Let's see you fell this tree." The young man stepped forward and skillfully felled a great tree. Impressed, the foreman exclaimed, "Start Monday!" Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday rolled by, and Thursday afternoon the foreman approached the young man and said, "You can pick up your paycheck on the way out today."

Startled, he replied, "I thought you paid on Friday."

"Normally we do," answered the foreman, "but we're letting you go today because you've fallen behind. Our daily felling charts show that you've dropped from first place on Monday to last on Wednesday."

"But I'm a hard worker," the young man objected. "I arrive first, leave last, and even have worked through my coffee breaks!"

The foreman, sensing the boy's integrity, thought for a minute and then asked, "Have you been sharpening your ax?" The young man replied, "I've been working too hard to take the time."²

Come with Me to a quiet place and get some rest. That's what Jesus said, and that's what the apostles expected. They thought they were going to have Jesus all to themselves. It didn't work out that way, however.

B. Jesus ended up ministering to multitudes (32-34). Verse 32 says, "And they went away in the boat to a desolate place by themselves." The boat ride covered about four miles. Luke 9:10 identifies the destination as Bethsaida, a town on the north edge of the Sea of Galilee.

So far so good. The fellows are kicking back (Peter's applying his sun tan lotion) in anticipation of the R & R that's soon to be theirs. And best of all, they get Jesus all to themselves, something the clamoring crowds haven't allowed them to enjoy for months.

Then verse 33, "Now many saw them going and recognized them, and they ran there on foot from all the towns and got there ahead of them." Due to the topography around the lake it was possible for people on the shore to see the boat leave and follow its journey. The folks calculated that since it was heading east it would end up in Bethsaida, so they ran there (some ran many miles) and in fact arrived before the boat did.

How would you have responded had you been in that boat on that day? With a frustrated, "What are *these people* doing here? Give us a break!" Not Jesus.

² K. Hughes, [Liberating Ministry From The Success Syndrome](#), Tyndale.

Verse 34 says, “When he went ashore he saw a great crowd, and he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd. And he began to teach them many things.” We gain two important insights into the heart of our Savior from His response.

1. *The Lord doesn't limit His compassion to us.* Was He tired? I'm sure He was. But when He saw these people—some who had run miles to get here—His heart was moved with compassion.

That's our Savior, beloved. He loves us. But He doesn't love *just us*. He's not our private Deity-in-a-bottle. He offers Himself to all who will repent and trust in Him.

By the way, did the disciples get their rest? Not the kind they may have anticipated. But notice the text. Marks says that *Jesus* did the teaching. The disciples had been teaching in prior days, but now He keeps teaching and they rest. Of course, He had been teaching prior to this too, but there's little time for Him during His public ministry.

2. *The Lord cares for all who need a shepherd.* To Jesus, these people were not a nuisance or an unwanted interruption in His plans. That's not how He sees them. Instead, to Him they were like sheep without a shepherd.

That's really not a compliment, by the way. What's true of sheep? Left to themselves they get lost. They can't find their way home. They can't locate necessary pasture. They're defenseless when wolves come. They are dependent, *needy*, very needy.

People are like that, then, and now. They need someone to lead them, to feed them, to care for them, to rescue them, and to mend them when they're hurt. People need a shepherd. And that's what Jesus is. He is the Good Shepherd who came to give His life for His sheep.

D. L. Moody was a great evangelist at the end of the 19th century. He also built a great Sunday School ministry for children in Chicago. In fact, young people came from all over to attend, often passing by other churches and Sunday Schools to be with Moody. When asked why he walked so far to attend Moody's Sunday School, one boy replied, “Because they love a fella over there!” The children could tell a difference.³

And the people in Jesus' day could tell a difference, too. It's why they ran miles to see Him, passing by the homes of other religious teachers on the way. They knew that He is someone cares for all who need a shepherd. That includes you, my friend. He cares.

For the disciples, a time to get away became a time for kingdom work to move forward. They expected one thing but the Lord had something else in mind. And so it will be in our lives at times. With Jesus, a retreat becomes an advance.

II. A need becomes an opportunity (35-44)

I realize we're about to read a very familiar story, one you've probably heard since childhood. The fact is, the account of the miracle of the feeding of the 5,000 appears in all four gospels (the only miracle He did of which this is true). Apparently, the Lord wanted us to consider it often, for it teaches us so much about the kind of Savior He is.

Isaiah 40:11 says, “He shall feed His flock like a shepherd.” That's what Jesus did here, *feed His flock*. As you read this miracle think about Israel in the Old Testament. God led His people Israel into the wilderness. So did Jesus with His people. Once there God gave Israel bread from heaven, manna. Jesus does likewise with His people here.

³ Wiersbe, p. 132.

Mark presents Jesus as the second Moses leading the new people of God. And as with Israel, so here, a need becomes an opportunity. What was the need?

A. The apostles saw a food shortage (35-36). Mark tells us in verses 35-36, “And when it grew late, his disciples came to him and said, ‘This is a desolate place, and the hour is now late.’³⁶ Send them away to go into the surrounding countryside and villages and buy themselves something to eat.”

The disciples assessed the situation and saw a problem. Too many people and not enough food. *Way too many* to be precise. They offered Jesus two possible solutions for the problem. This one, to send the people away to get their own food (the disciples weren’t too keen on the crowd being there in the first place). And another we’ll see in a moment, to buy food. Those were the logical solutions to the dilemma at hand.

Wiersbe comments, “With that kind of approach, they would have made ideal committee members! Someone has defined a committee as a group of people who individually can do nothing and collectively decide that nothing can be done.”⁴

That’s what the apostles saw that day, a food shortage. The Lord, on the other hand, saw the situation quite differently.

B. Jesus saw a teachable moment (37-44). In fact, the Lord used the situation to teach His men (and us) five important lessons.

1. *Jesus wants to use us (37).* “But he answered, ‘You give them something to eat.’” Those were surprising words! John 6:6 indicates this was a test, for He already had in mind what He was going to do.

As verse 37 continues (NIV), “They said to him, ‘That would take eight months of a man’s wages! Are we to go and spend that much on bread and give it to them to eat?’” John’s parallel account states that Philip is the disciple who did the calculating and speaking at this point. “It’ll take two hundred denarii, Lord!” A denarius was the amount of money a common laborer made for a day’s work, hence, the NIV’s calculation, *eight month’s wages*.

We learn something vital about the Lord in this. Hear Him again. “*You* give them something to eat.” He wants to use *us* to do His work. He works through people to minister to people.

2. *Jesus wants to use what we have (38).* Verse 38, “And he said to them, ‘How many loaves do you have? Go and see.’ And when they had found out, they said, ‘Five, and two fish.’”

John indicates that Andrew found the five loaves and two fish and that they belonged to a small boy, apparently the boy’s “sack lunch” if you will. John also states these were barley loaves (6:9). Unlike the loaves of bread we buy in stores today, these loaves were small and flat. A person could easily eat several of them in one meal.

That question says so much to us about how the Lord works. *What do you have?* Jesus didn’t need five loaves and two fish. He who created the universe by speaking could have filled empty baskets the same way. Why did He use the five loaves and two fish? It’s because He wants to use what we have. And of course, what we have has come from Him in the first place.

3. *Jesus wants us to be participants, not spectators (39-41).* Verse 39 says (NIV), “Then Jesus directed them to have all the people sit down in groups on the green grass.” John 6:10 says there was “much grass.” The “green grass” shows the incident took place in the late spring-time, for that’s when the rains come and cause the barren

⁴ Wiersbe, p. 132.

region to turn green with grass again, in mid-April. At that time of year the sun sets at 6 p.m. so this miracle occurred in the late afternoon hours.⁵

Notice verse 40, “So they sat down in groups, by hundreds and by fifties.” God is a God of order, and according to 1 Corinthians 14:40 He wants His work to be done decently and in order. Sure, the Lord could have caused the food to drop in the laps of the people that day, but He chose to include the disciples in this miracle. Jesus wants His people to be *participants*, not spectators in His work.

Think of the faith it took for the disciples at this point. They’re approaching people and asking them to move and get in groups. For what? If no food shows up, they’re going to feel pretty foolish. But as Cole says, “This is the risk which faith must take, if it is to be truly faith.”⁶

Verse 41 says, “And taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven and said a blessing and broke the loaves and gave them to the disciples to set before the people [there’s the participation again]. And he divided the two fish among them all.” With those two actions—the looking up and the public giving of thanks—Jesus made the source of the miracle to come crystal clear.

By the way, do you stop to thank the Lord for your food before you eat it? He gave it to you, as every other blessing we enjoy. And He deserves the credit for it. Indeed, it pleases Him greatly, as any parents knows, when His children say, *thank you*.

4. *Jesus wants us to know that He alone can satisfy (42).* According to verse 42, “And they all ate and were satisfied.” John 6:11 reveals the people ate as much as they wanted, not just a taste but complete satisfaction.

Keep in mind what they’re eating. What kind of bread? Probably, barley bread. Is that important? Listen to Barclay’s observation, “Barley loaves were the food of the poorest of the poor. Barley bread was the cheapest and the coarsest of all bread.”⁷ And the fish weren’t halibut or salmon. Barclay calls them salt-fish, about the size of sardines, noting they were eaten as relish with the dry rolls.

This was no lobster-fest. Granted, Jesus could have started with a lobster dinner and turned it into 5,000 lobster dinners. The miracle would have been no harder for Him. But He didn’t.

I can’t help but wonder what our response would be if Jesus performed the same miracle in our midst today. I wonder how many of us would complain about the menu selection. We have such high expectations. We may pray, “Give us our daily bread,” but we expect that bread to come with all the trimmings.

These folks ate and were *satisfied*. Ponder that word carefully. *Satisfied*. We live in a society full of people who have everything but this. They’re *not* satisfied. We have cars, boats, houses, clothes, and smart phones. We have cupboards packed, not just with bread but twinkies and pop and other dream foods that most of the world can only imagine. And it’s fine to have these things, but the question is, *are we satisfied?*

Many are not. The reason? It’s what Jesus made so clear that day long ago. He alone can satisfy. To find lasting satisfaction you must know Him. You can have everything else the world offers, but if you don’t know Him, you won’t know true satisfaction.

⁵ Barclay, p. 157.

⁶ R. Alan Cole, p. 177.

⁷ Barclay, p. 159.

It's significant that, according to John 6, this miracle became the basis for Jesus' message on "the bread of life." He declared in John 6:35, "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."

Are you looking for satisfaction, my friend? Look to Him. He came to earth, died for sinners, conquered death, and offers life that is abundant to all who will turn from their selfish ways and accept Him.

But perhaps the biggest lesson Jesus used this teachable moment to relate is this.

5. *Jesus wants us to know that little becomes much when given to Him (43-44).* Verse 43 says (NIV), "And the disciples picked up twelve basketfuls of broken pieces of bread and fish."

It's interesting that there's more bread after the meal than before it, from five small loaves to twelve basketfuls to be precise. Barclay makes the point that no orthodox Jew traveled without his basket (*kophinos*), a wicker-work object shaped like a narrow-necked pitcher that broadens towards the bottom. A very orthodox Jew would carry his own food with him in the basket so he wouldn't have to eat somebody else's non-kosher food.

Why twelve basketfuls? Jesus made sure there's enough leftover miracle-food for each of the twelve apostles to take home a basketful.

There's no waste here. The Lord is teaching His men about good stewardship. Cole suggests that the gathered food would be the disciples' meals in the days to come, adding, "They could not simply throw away the bread already provided and expect Jesus to work a special miracle like this every day, exciting though that would have been."⁸

Mark finishes the story with a statistic in verse 44, "The number of the men who had eaten was five thousand." The Greek term here for "men" refers to males, as opposed to women and children, indicating there could have been 10,000 to 20,000 people at this hillside banquet.⁹

What a day it was, the day *a need became an opportunity!* Ponder the lessons again.

1. Jesus wants to use us (37).
2. Jesus wants to use what we have (38).
3. Jesus wants us to be participants, not spectators (39-41).
4. Jesus wants us to know that He alone can satisfy (42).
5. Jesus wants us to know that little becomes much when given to Him (43-44).

The question I want to pose is this. What would have happened had the boy with the lunch said, "No. It's my lunch. I'm not giving it away. It's not my fault the rest of you didn't bring anything to eat."?

A miracle occurred that day because someone was willing to give what he had, as little as it was, to the Lord. It all started with five loaves and two fish placed in the Master's hands.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, allow me to speak plainly. I have good news. We have *everything* we need as a church to accomplish the *mission* before us. That's not an exaggeration. I didn't say we have everything we may want, but we have everything we need to accomplish our God-given mission as a church.

That's good to know, especially in light of the needs we're facing. We have missionaries with needs. We know of other missionaries who are willing to go, but need support.

⁸ Cole, p. 178.

⁹ That's a lot of people considering that the closest towns, Capernaum and Bethsaida, had only two to three thousand people.

On the home front, we have needs for our local ministries. We need consistent income in order to support our children and teen ministries, our outreach to those in crisis pregnancy situations through CRADLE, our benevolence ministries for those with material needs. And then there are practical needs such as utilities and building repair so we have a functional facility in which the above ministries occur, plus others such as Sunday School training, biblical counseling for those facing challenges, and more.

And here's the good news again. The church of Jesus Christ has what is needed. We have all we need to do the work God has called us to do.

There's one small, potential glitch. The resources are in our pockets (or to use the terminology from our story, the boy still has the sack lunch). Needs are met when God's people reach into their pockets and say to the Lord, "All that I have has come from You. I want to give this back to You for Your work."

In the Old Testament God commanded His people to give ten percent. What's ten percent? Not very much really, not when you consider it all comes from Him and He allowed His people to keep ninety percent for their needs. But on the other hand, ten percent becomes much when it's given with cheerful devotion to the Lord.

The New Testament takes giving a step further. There's no percentage given, just a practical promise (2 Cor 9:6-7), "Remember this: Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously. Each man should give what he has decided in his heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver." Little becomes much when given to Jesus.

The same could be said for abilities. We have all we need in this church to do the ministries God wants us to do. We have people with the necessary spiritual gifts and talents to do evangelism, soul care, hospitality, the care of shut-ins, and the rest. We have all the resources we need. The question again is, where are the resources?

You say, "But I can't do much for God." Hold on. The boy didn't do much, either. He just surrendered his lunch. It's the Lord that did the great work. And He used that little sack lunch to accomplish it. Little becomes much when placed in the Master's hands.

With Jesus, a retreat becomes an advance. A need becomes an opportunity.

Application: Three lessons to remember when the unexpected enters our lives...

1. *What's "Plan B" to us is "Plan A" to God.* He knows everything and nothing catches Him off guard.
2. *When we don't understand the unexpected, God does.* That's why we can trust Him. That's why we must choose to trust Him even when life doesn't make sense.
3. *God's plan is always about His glory and our good.* He always has His glory in mind, and our good. Even when the unexpected occurs. *Especially* when the unexpected occurs!

Closing Song: #460 "*All the Way My Savior Leads Me*" (all three verses)

Communion