

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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The Feeding of the 5,000 and the Discourse on the Bread of Life - John 6

I well remember being present at a business meeting some years ago. It became necessary to nominate someone to do a certain job. The name of someone who was not present was put forward. "What!" burst out one of the others. "Him! He couldn't organise a Sunday School picnic!" Of course, everyone laughed uproariously. I looked around. I quickly realised that I was almost certainly the only committed Christian present. I thought I had better put things in perspective. "Excuse me", I said. "Have any of you ever actually organised a Sunday School picnic?" Of course, none of them had. I proceeded to tell them that to do that very thing was no light matter. The Sunday School I was introduced to as a toddler had 1,350 scholars in its heyday, admittedly before my time. It was still operating at about eight hundred strong when I joined as a two-year-old scholar, and at about six hundred when I became a teacher in my late teens. So I felt I had some experience to draw upon. I assured my business colleagues that organising a Sunday School picnic is no easy or light matter.

Perhaps the happiest, and probably one of the biggest Sunday School picnics that has ever taken place is described in today's chapter, John 6. Before we get into the detail, it will be useful to get the gist of its teaching by splitting the chapter into four major sections.

1. verses 1-21. The coming into the world of the Son of God.
2. verses 22-42. His earthly ministry as He lived in the world.
3. verses 43-59. His unique death by which He left the world.
4. verses 60-63. His ascension back to His Father in heaven.

This fits together very neatly. First, His coming into the world. Secondly, His moving through the world. Thirdly, His departure out of the world. Fourthly, His ascension up to heaven. We do get a few verses added at the end of the chapter which remind us of the challenge that comes to those to whom these truths are made known. Interwoven with all this, we have the record in verses 15-21 of the Lord demonstrating His supremacy and power in the stilling of the storm. He is fully in command of every situation. All this emerges from the account of the remarkable miracle with which the chapter begins. That is, the feeding of a vast multitude of hungry folk.

A well-known and much loved hymn says:

*I am trusting Thee Lord Jesus
Thou alone shalt lead.
Every day and hour supplying
All my need.*

Let us make no mistake. That's what today's chapter is all about. There isn't a problem that needs to be resolved, or a difficulty that needs to be faced, that cannot be put right, if only we bring it to the Lord. Verse 6 says, "He knew". Of course He did. He knows all things. Indeed, this phrase, 'He knew', is characteristic of John's Gospel. Of course He knows everything. He is the Son of God. He knows all about our problems before we bring them to Him. But He does want us to come to Him, to unburden ourselves in His presence.

The immediate context is about food. Now, I am no connoisseur in the food business. I do like a balanced diet of good food, properly prepared, well cooked and attractively presented. But I'm no culinary expert. But the problem here went much deeper than the niceties of diet or menu. The background to the incident was something like this. Basically, a large crowd had assembled to listen to the Lord Jesus. The fiercest heat of the day had subsided. The people were a little weary. It was at the end of a hot, sticky day. They were happy, but weary. And undoubtedly hungry. The disciples of the Lord Jesus realised that there was a problem. However we compute the present-day cost of providing such a crowd with even a very basic meal, the scale of the problem was clearly way beyond the capacity of the disciples to resolve.

What sort of people would be present? I suppose the mix would be similar to that of a fairly typical congregation. Some would be there by themselves. Some would be with friends. Some would be together with the rest of the family. All generations would be present. What would be their attitude? Some would feel that they wouldn't miss it for

the world. Some would be curious, perhaps mildly interested. Some would be quite passive, not there by any personal conviction, just there because it was the place to be, the sort of thing you do, that's all. Perhaps some would be there under duress, because of peer pressure or family pressure. Some present might even have been actively hostile. At all events, there they were. Perhaps about twenty thousand of them in all.

The disciples did the right thing. They came to the Lord. That's always a good start, in any situation. "Lord", they said. Very good! If we come to Him, we have to recognise His Lordship, His authority over us. "Lord", they said. "If we are left with this huge crowd, we'll have big problems. We'd better send them away to fend for themselves." It seemed to them to be the logical solution. The answer the Lord gave them must have shaken them rigid. "What? Send them away? Whatever we do, that cannot be the answer. My consistent message is, Come unto Me. Sending people away is just not My style. Think again!" As recorded in the equivalent record in Matthew 14 verse 18, He said, "Bring them to Me". It is certainly true that whatever the problem, He can solve it. Do we believe that? When you or I have a problem, do we bring it to the Lord?

As to the miracle itself, what really happened? Multiplication was not in the hands of the little lad who had the five loaves and two little fishes, that's for sure. Not even in the hands of the disciples! Power was in the hands of Jesus alone. What did He do? He fulfilled the promise of Psalm 132:15. "I will abundantly bless their provision. I will satisfy the poor with bread." How did He do it? He looked up to heaven. All that He did was done in dependence on the Father Who had sent Him into the world. He gave thanks. He distributed to the disciples. They passed the food on to the multitude. The people were fed and filled. The disciples' hearts had failed them at the idea of giving each person merely 'a little', as verse 7 tells us. What the Lord provided resulted in them all being filled, with twelve full baskets of fragments surplus. What a lesson! We shall never exhaust the blessing that Jesus gives.

An issue which is secondary to this particular incident, but very important in itself, in the overall picture, is this. God honours faith. But, before that faith is honoured, it is very often put to the test, to be given the opportunity to demonstrate how real it is. That is certainly what happened here. The multitude suffered from lack of food. The disciples suffered from lack of faith. When they brought the problem to the Lord, He put whatever faith they had in Him to an immediate test. Note the sequence. The Lord says to them, "Give ye them to eat." Their immediate reply was, "It's beyond us!" The next part is so simple. "He commanded the people to sit down." And they did! That is, they did exactly what He told them to do. What was the result of that? "And they did all eat and were filled." Enough and to spare - twelve baskets left over. Obedience is the true way to blessing.

In contrast to that, we have in verse 28 the question raised by the Jews. "What shall we do, that we might work the works of God." Notice, they used the plural, 'works'. They were willing, even anxious, to try to do as much as they could, in an attempt to deserve the blessing. This is what they had been taught under the Law of Moses. The Lord has to say, "No. That's not the way to blessing. This is the way to salvation. This is the work, singular. This is the work of God, that you believe on Him Whom God hath sent." One work, the work of Christ on the Cross, can alone satisfy the claims of God upon us. When we trust Christ as our Saviour, that is the anchor for our souls. What a contrast between The Law of Moses and the grace of Christ:

*Do this and that, the Law demands,
But gives me neither feet nor hands.
The grace of Christ brings better things;
It bids me fly, and gives me wings.*

Now, how does all this fit into the basic framework of the chapter suggested earlier? Clearly, if the blessing the Lord is so anxious to shower upon us were to be made available, it was absolutely necessary that the Son of God should come into the world. He was born, a babe at Bethlehem. He grew up. He lived a perfect life of complete purity and dependence upon God. As He Himself said, "I do always those things which please the Father" (John 8:29). His life of service and blessing is exemplified in this chapter in the feeding of the multitude and the stilling of the storm.

But even that perfect life was not, in itself, sufficient to satisfy the claims of God on us sinners, you and me. He must indeed die, and that the death of the cross, if He were to be our Saviour. Surely:

*'No other One was good enough
To pay the price of sin,
He only could unlock the gate
Of heaven and let us in.'*

His death, the significance of it, and its value to God, are dealt with metaphorically in verses 43-59. Even that is not the end. His ascension back to heaven is summarised in verses 60-63. They remind us that His purpose in coming into the world, to deal with sin, and undo the works of the devil, was not complete until He ascended back to where He

was before He came into the world. The necessary challenge to those who have been made to know these tremendous truths is referred to fleetingly at the end of the chapter.

Having satisfied ourselves as to the basic layout of the chapter, and learned some of the lessons made plain in it, consider this. We could, and would, have no spiritual life at all, if it were not true that the Lord Jesus had died and risen again. But, the chapter tells us that what was necessary for us to be given spiritual life in the first place is just as necessary to sustain that life and help to develop it, as long as we live in the world. How does the chapter teach us that? Or, rather, how do the Lord's own words recorded in the chapter teach us that? It is largely a matter of considering what we learn from two different tenses the Lord used in what He had to say. Let us listen to verses 51-53: "I am the living bread which came down from heaven: if any man shall have eaten of this bread, he shall live for ever: and the bread that I will give is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world. The Jews therefore strove among themselves, saying, How can this man give us his flesh to eat? Then Jesus said unto them, Verily, verily, I say unto you, Except ye shall have eaten the flesh of the Son of man, and drunk his blood, ye have no life in you."

The whole of the chapter, indeed, the whole of John's Gospel, makes the matter plain. Unless I believe, and have thoroughly absorbed and made good in my own soul, the truth involved in Jesus dying and rising again, I have no spiritual life in me, at all. Then, in verse 54, a change comes in. The Lord Jesus began to use the present tense, of things that are true, and need to be true, in a continuing way. Let us listen to the whole of the statement, verses 54-58: "Whoso eateth my flesh, and drinketh my blood, hath eternal life; and I will raise him up at the last day. For my flesh is meat indeed, and my blood is drink indeed. He that eateth my flesh, and drinketh my blood, dwelleth in me, and I in him. As the living Father hath sent me, and I live by the Father: so he that eateth me, even he shall live by me. This is that bread which came down from heaven: not as your fathers did eat manna, and are dead: he that eateth of this bread shall live for ever."

In simple terms, what is the basic teaching? Surely, this! He has already said that eternal life is given, in a once-and-for-all and irrevocable sense, to those who believe that He died for them and rose again. That is once-and-for-all salvation! But now the Lord Jesus builds upon that foundation truth. The basis on which God gave us eternal life was that we believed that Jesus died and rose again. Past tense, accomplished once and for all time. Praise the Lord for that! But, now that we have that life, true life, spiritual life, eternal life, how is that life to be sustained, fed, grow and develop? By continuing to feed upon Christ! How do we do that? We meditate upon His precious word, dwelling on what the scripture says about Him. His glorious Person! His moral beauty! His perfect life and service on earth! The value to God of His work upon the cross of Calvary! The reality and significance of His glorious resurrection and ascension back to heaven! His present work as God's High Priest in heaven! The glorious hope of His coming again! The need to be true to Him while we wait for Him to come! All these, and much, much more! As we do so, the Holy Spirit, Who dwells within us, will make these truths about our glorious Saviour real and good in our souls. Summing up, we are very much in line here with the hearty preacher who says, "Christ for the sinner, Christ for the saint. Christ for the unbeliever, Christ for the believer." True blessing for all lies in ministering Christ to the soul.

No wonder that the Lord Jesus, speaking symbolically of Himself, says, "I am the Bread of Life." Indeed, this is a very good heading over the whole of the chapter.

Let us make absolutely sure that we are indeed saved, we do have eternal life, by believing that Christ died for our sins, according to the scriptures. But let us also make sure that the eternal life that God has given us is given the opportunity to grow and develop, by continuing to feed upon Christ day by day. Let us read His word, the Holy Scriptures, day by day. Let us think about the Lord Jesus Himself. Let us spend time with Him, praying and meditating. Let us enjoy His company in the communion of our souls. If we do so, we will be living out the teaching of John's Gospel chapter 6. God grant that it might be so.

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