

THE TESTING OF FAITH

by Ray C. Stedman

It is no coincidence in God's program I am sure, that this Sunday which has been set aside as World Food Day is also the day we come to the account in John's gospel of Jesus feeding the 5,000 beside the Sea of Galilee.

The last time we saw our Lord he was speaking to the people of Jerusalem, following the healing of the impotent man at the pool of Bethesda. Here we find a major difference between the Gospel of John and the other three gospels. They seem to focus largely upon our Lord's ministry in Galilee, and for a two-year period they follow him in much of his healing and teaching ministry there. But John selects only two miracles out of that two-year period: The miracle of the feeding of the 5,000, and the accompanying miracle of Jesus' walking on the water to his disciples during the storm. All four gospels record these two miracles, and John's selection of this particular incident indicates there is something extremely important about it. In our Lord's words to the multitude on this occasion he gives the first hint of his approaching death.

After this Jesus went to the other side of the Sea of Galilee, which is the Sea of Tiberias. And a multitude followed him, because they saw the signs which he did on those who were diseased. Jesus went up on the mountain, and there sat down with his disciples. Now the Passover, the feast of the Jews, was at hand. {John 6:1-4 RSV}

That last sentence dates this incident in the spring of the year when the hills would be green with grass. The multitudes were following Jesus everywhere despite the fact that it was the Passover season, when they ought to have been on their way to Jerusalem. The Law required that every male Jew celebrate the Passover there if they could possibly get away. So ordinarily these great multitudes would not be in Galilee but in Jerusalem.

John has included this to indicate why Jesus did what he did on this occasion. These great multitudes followed our Lord everywhere he went because they did not dare miss the tremendous excitement of the "signs" which he did. He was now feeling the pressure of these crowds, and wanted to get away for a time alone with his disciples, who had been ministering from town to town themselves and had seen the power of God manifested through them. They got into a boat to go across the northern end of the Sea of Galilee to the eastern shore.

But the multitudes would not give up. As the boat left to cross the lake they began to run along the northern shore, through rather rough country, to get to where they saw the boat was heading. Jesus and his disciples arrived first and went up on the hillside together. As he watched he could see the crowd coming along the shore and eventually gathering at the foot of the hills. His response was to determine to do something for them. He knew that ordinarily they would be in Jerusalem for the Passover, so it is clear that it entered into his heart to have a Passover feast right there in the wilderness with them. In Verse 6 we read "he himself knew what he would do."

Yet he also uses this occasion to give to the disciples what we can only call a mid-term examination! They had been with him for two years and had heard all his amazing words. They had seen the mighty power of God demonstrated again and again and had themselves been sent out on a ministry. Jesus now decides to test their faith. According to this account, Jesus chose to examine Philip first:

Lifting up his eyes, then, and seeing that a multitude was coming to him, Jesus said to Philip, "How are we to buy bread, so that these people may eat?" This he said to test him, for he himself knew what he would do. {John 6:5-6 RSV}

Examination time has come. We are not sure why Jesus chose Philip. It may be that Philip was the one whom he thought to be most advanced in the lessons of faith. These disciples all had unique personalities. Peter, of course, was loud and brassy. He had his foot in his mouth most of the time -- the Jim Watt of the disciple band. James and John were ambitious and fiery. They lost their tempers easily -- that is why Jesus called them

"Sons of Thunder," {Mark 3:17}. Philip was quiet, deep, and rather mousey, the kind who hung around in the background all the time. Yet I am sure Jesus saw in him a man of deep perception. The quiet kind are often the deep thinkers. Perhaps he chose Philip because he was the one who would most likely understand all that was underneath the very dramatic surface phenomena which the disciples were witnessing.

In any event Jesus said to Philip "How are we to buy bread so that these people may eat?" He did not really expect to buy bread. In fact Jesus knew that Philip could not possibly answer his question. There was no village and no stores nearby, and they had very little money besides. His question is clearly designed to set before Philip a predicament that had no human solution.

Has that ever happened to you? Perhaps some of you right now are in that kind of a state: You are faced with a predicament for which you can find no answer in the normal resources of human life. That is what Jesus did with Philip.

Our Lord, of course, was thinking of ministry to these people, of meeting their need. But Philip according to this account immediately began to think of money. He responds to Jesus' question: "Two hundred denarii would not buy enough bread for each of them to get a little." As he estimated the resources available, Philip gave up in despair; he thought there was no way this problem could be met.

God forgive us for the Philip in all of us! How many times has this happened in our own experience! As we contemplate the Word of God to us he commands us to feed the multitudes -- not only physically, when need arises (such as we are doing in World Food Day) -- but even more important, spiritually. As I travel about the country I am distressed by the fact that very few churches seem to understand that the church is sent into the world to teach the world truth that it never could find out in any other way, truth that is desperately needed to handle life and make it work as God intended it to work. In the secular realms of knowledge there are great missing elements, great blanks, that the people of the world try to fill up in a dozen different ways, but only the church possesses the truth, the bread that can feed the hungers of life.

What do we do when we hear this command, "Feed the multitudes"? We respond like Philip. We begin to think of committees, and fund raising, and organizations. We use very impressive-sounding words: We have to "set our goals," we must "understand the parameters of the problem," etc. The result is that very little gets done. Our Lord, however, says to begin where you are, with what you have. I am convinced that if the church would just do that across this country, all these expensive substitutes would not be needed. We would soon transform our country by the sharing of the Word.

This is the way that news about Jesus had already spread throughout the land, and why multitudes were already following him. They did not have television, telephone or telegraph, but they did have the all-time most effective means of communication: Tell-a-person! That is the way the news about Jesus had spread!

In response to Jesus' question, Philip gasps in utter despair, "Lord, how can we do this?" In this mid-term examination Philip gets a big "F," just as we probably would have too. Isn't it interesting to think that, if Jesus had given that command, "Feed the multitude," to an atheist -- say, to Madelyn Murray O'Hare -- she would have said exactly what Philip said? Without any reckoning upon the resources of God whatsoever, thinking only in terms of the human resources available, she would have responded in the same words as Philip, "We don't have enough money. We can't do this. It takes money to buy bread." Our Lord would have had to point out what is true everywhere in the Scripture, that it is ministry that comes first, and money follows. It is rather shocking to think that if this question were asked of an unbeliever he would say the same thing as a believer would. In other words, there would be no difference between the way an atheist, and a true disciple of our Lord would react to this command of Jesus. What a revelation of Christian unbelief!

Another of Jesus' disciples, Andrew, does a little better. He gets a "D":

One of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, said to him, "There is a lad here who has five barley loaves and two fish; but what are they among so many?" {John 6:8-9 RSV}

There is not a lot of faith in his response, but there is a little. Andrew had been checking out the crowd. No wonder he has become the patron saint of Scotland: He is not interested in spending money to feed this crowd! If you doubt that, I would point out to you what is not evident in the English text but is in the Greek. That is that Andrew actually uses a Scottish expression here. He did not say, as this account reads, "There is a lad here" (though that is a Scottish word for boy), but he actually used the diminutive when he referred to both the boy and the fish. What he said was, "Lord, there is a wee laddie here and he has five loaves of bread and two wee fishes." That was all he could find in the crowd. Given his makeup you can be sure he had checked out every possibility in the throng and this is all he could come up with.

But, of course, that is all Jesus needs. He never asks us to start accumulating more before we begin to minister. All he wants is what we have right now. As soon as he found out what was available in the crowd, that is all he needed; just one lad's lunch was all it took. Immediately Jesus said:

"Make the people sit down." Now there was much grass in the place; so the men sat down, in number about five thousand. Jesus then took the loaves, and when he had given thanks, he distributed them to those who were seated; so also the fish, as much as they wanted. And when they had eaten their fill, he told his disciples, "Gather up the fragments left over, that nothing may be lost." So they gathered them up and filled twelve baskets with fragments from the five barley loaves, left by those who had eaten. {John 6:10-13 RSV}

Notice the simplicity of our Lord's actions. We have seen this before in the account of the changing of water into wine. There is no razzmatazz, no special pleading, no raising his hands and dramatically crying out to God. No, there is merely a simple taking of the bread and the fish and, lifting his eyes, giving thanks to the Father. Remember that in, Chapter 5, Jesus has already declared the process by which he performed his work: He said he could only do what he saw the Father doing. In that inner vision of his heart he could see the Father feeding the multitude, that this was what was demanded for that moment, and he simply responded with thankful expectation that God would do what he said he would do. I hope you have the habit of giving thanks at every meal, public or private. Remember that,

Back of the bread is the snowy flour,
And back of the flour, the mill.
And back of the mill is the field of wheat.
The rain and the Father's will.

So Jesus gave thanks for what had been provided and began to feed the multitude.

I have often wondered just when the miracle of multiplication took place. Did Jesus place all the fish and bread in a basket and send the disciples out with little amounts of it to distribute it, and then as people reached in it kept increasing? Or did he heap up a great quantity of it, and then send them out to distribute that? How did he do this? I wondered about this for a long time until I looked carefully at Mark's account of this gospel and found that Mark tells how Jesus did it.

Mark says that Jesus "blessed, and broke" the bread {Mark 6:41 RSV}, and he uses the aorist tense, which is to say it was a single action never repeated. Then Mark uses the imperfect tense, "he kept on giving to the disciples." In other words, the miracle took place in our Lord's hands. As he held the simple meal in his hands he would break off pieces and give to the disciples, and he kept on doing that. There never was an increase in the amount in his hand, but there was always a continual supply until the whole multitude of five thousand males (the text uses that term) alone were fed, plus, undoubtedly, another three to five thousand more women and children. There were probably ten thousand people in that great crowd who were fed. And they were not given a tiny amount. This was not an airline meal! They "ate their fill," it says. You can almost hear the burps coming from the crowd as this wonderful supply is given.

Then, in line with the orderliness of God, our Lord commanded the disciples to clean up the place, save all the fragments, and police the grounds so that nothing was left to mar the landscape that God had made. There is a wonderful lesson on ecology here also. According to the account they filled twelve baskets with the fragments remaining. That is a hint as to where the baskets came from. Obviously these were the disciples' own personal

baskets. In those days every Jew who traveled carried a basket, just like a woman today carries a purse. And like women today, they had an amazing array of things in their baskets! They were prepared for any eventuality. But they dumped them all out and gathered up the fragments, so that they each had a full basket of food for the rest of the day and for the trip back in the boat. What a wonderful account!

There have been many attempts to explain this miracle on rational grounds:

Some have said this was a miracle of sharing, that, as Jesus was teaching the people, he so moved them they abandoned their selfish habits and shared with their own families and with others the lunch they had brought with them so that there proved to be plenty for everybody. But this word about Andrew scouting the crowd lays that argument to rest. He had done so to see how much food could be found in this desert place to feed the multitude. This crowd would never have found time to go back and pack a lunch. When they saw Jesus leaving they immediately ran around the north shore of the lake to follow him.

Another suggestion is that this was really a miracle of sublimation, that Jesus' teaching was so marvelous people forgot about their food and they went home saying, "Oh, that was so great! He fed us so full I'm not even hungry." Now that can happen. I have been in meetings that were so marvelous that one could forget about eating. But I do not think that is the case here because, as a little girl said when this was taught to her in Sunday School. "What did they put in the twelve baskets, then?" That is a good question!

C. S. Lewis says this was a miracle of the old creation, that as he did when he changed the water to wine, Jesus simply short-circuited something that happens regularly in nature over a long period of time so that it happened in an instant. Wheat multiplies in the fields, and it makes possible a continuing supply of bread as it is ground and baked. Fish multiply in the sea, and that process of nature keeps a plentiful supply of fish available all the time for the fish markets of the world. Though it included human effort and human preparation, Lewis suggests that by the creative power of the Father at work in him, our Lord short-circuited that whole process and wrote in small letters instantly what is already written in large letters across the whole panorama of nature.

That may very well be what happened here. But whatever was the explanation of it, it was the Father at work in the Son.

Notice the effect Jesus' action had upon the crowd:

When the people saw the sign which he had done they said, "This is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world!"

Perceiving then that they were about to take him by force to make him king, Jesus withdrew again to the mountain by himself. {John 6:14-15 RSV}

That is a remarkable statement of a proper conclusion, followed by a terribly wrong response. As they saw this miracle happen, their minds went back to a verse in the 18th chapter of Deuteronomy, where Moses, who had fed the people in the wilderness with manna from heaven, had said to the people, "The Lord your God shall raise up unto you a prophet like me," {cf, Deut 18:15 RSV}. The murmur began to spread through the whole crowd, "This must be the one of whom Moses said, 'There will be a prophet like unto me'." And they were dead right. That was one of the signs of the Messiah; that was indeed proof that here was the one of whom Moses spoke. But the strange and sad thing was that when they reached that proper conclusion, they immediately reacted in a very improper way. It says that Jesus, "perceiving then that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king," separated himself and went back up on the mountainside alone.

What a strange reaction! They were not ready to follow him as the Messiah; they wanted to use him; they wanted God to work for them according to their program and their schedule. Before we judge them too sharply, let us ask ourselves, do we do the same thing?

Have you ever become angry with God because he did not give you what you asked for? You were really expecting him to work for you and to do what you wanted? I do not know if you have done that, but I have. I

have been very upset with God sometimes because he did not do what I told him to do. This story is given to teach us that this is not the kind of relationship that men are to have with God.

Stanley Goldfoot, our friend from Israel, told me that when Menachim Begin, the Prime Minister of Israel, was at the height of his popularity in that country and the focus of attention all over the world because of his stand for the interests of his country, crowds would gather about him in the streets of Jerusalem and cry out, "Hamelek Yisrael" (The King of Israel). Israel has been looking for a king ever since the days of David. When these people beside the Sea of Galilee were fed by Jesus they thought, "Here is the one who can take care of all our needs. We don't have to worry again about eating. Let's get him and make him to be our king." But our Lord would not consent to being used like that.

The only proper attitude toward the greatness and majesty of God is written right across the front of this auditorium: "You are not your own; you are bought with a price," {1 Cor 6:19b-20a}. Our greatest privilege is to see ourselves as his instruments, doing what he wants to do, not using him to do what we want to do. Surely this is the lesson which this incident engraved upon the minds of these disciples -- that they were to be his followers, and that when they were ready to take that role, God himself was ready to do great things through them.

I hope this account sends us back to our daily work with the realization that the Living God has chosen us to be a channel of his blessing, to work in us and through us to do what he wants to do. That is the greatest joy and the greatest privilege of life.

Prayer:

Lord, in this quiet moment many of us are having to face the same issue that these people faced long ago: Is Jesus to be King or simply a politician to be manipulated at our beck and call? Help us to crown him King, to be ready to follow that he may indeed minister through us, so that we may respond with thankful expectation to this command to feed the multitude around us who hunger for the delivering Word of life. We ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.

Title: The Testing of Faith
By: Ray C. Stedman
Series: The Gospel of John
Scripture: John 6:1-15
Message No: 16
Catalog No: 3846
Date: November 13, 1983

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