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John 6:1-15

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## FOOD THAT FEEDS THE SOUL

In his book *The Five People You Meet in Heaven*, Mitch Albom concludes by making this comment on the secret of heaven: "The world is full of stories, but the stories are all one."<sup>1</sup> There is a lot of truth in that statement. We all have stories. And while all of our stories are unique, they are part of a larger story: the story of the Bible. One story in the Old Testament, the Exodus story, is critical to understanding both the Old and New Testaments. Exodus is the larger story that defines and shapes our own individual stories.

We have come to chapter 6 of John's gospel and the story of the feeding of the five thousand. This is the only miracle recorded in all four gospels. Following this opening account, John details the story of Jesus walking on water, and follows that with a lengthy discourse on the bread of life. As was the case with chapter 5, this chapter is a cohesive unit which should be taken as a whole. This morning we will focus on the miracle of Jesus multiplying the loaves and fish.

**After these things Jesus went away to the other side of the Sea of Galilee (or Tiberias). A large crowd followed Him, because they saw the signs which He was performing on those who were sick. Then Jesus went up on the mountain, and there He sat down with His disciples. Now the Passover, the feast of the Jews, was near. (John 6:1-4 NASB)**

John introduces the change in scene, using his standard transitional phrase, "after these things." These words establish sequence, not tight chronology. Jesus had been in Jerusalem attending an unnamed feast, and there he healed a man who had been sick for 38 years. The healing occurred on the Sabbath, and this gave rise to a debate about the Sabbath, leading Jesus to proclaim that he was the one who fulfilled Sabbath.

Here in John 6 Jesus is back in Galilee. This is the only chapter in this gospel that deals with the Galilean phase of Jesus' ministry, a phase that dominates the other gospels. Some scholars are of the opinion that chapters 5 and 6 should be switched due to the rapid change of locations. However, the section 1:19 through 4:54 is also marked by sudden shifts in location.

Jesus goes away to the other side of the Sea of Galilee (or Tiberias). This mention of Tiberias is for the Greek reader. A city named after the Roman emperor Tiberias Caesar was established in AD 20 by Herod Antipas. A large crowd was following Jesus because of the signs he had performed. They were looking for a show, for the excitement of seeing miracles

rather than seeking to follow and obey him. Jesus went up on a mountain and sat down with his disciples.

We learn that the Passover, the feast of the Jews, was near. In chapter 5 the Jewish marker was Sabbath; now the context changes to Passover. There is no mention of a celebration or feast, but we must read this in light of what Passover celebrates. We have seen that chapters 5-10 form a unit centered around the Jewish feasts of Sabbath, Passover, Tabernacles, and the Feast of Dedication. Jesus is redefining the significance of these feasts, demonstrating that he is the fulfillment of these very occasions.

This is the second of three Passovers of which John makes mention. On the occasion of the first Passover, recorded in chapter 2, Jesus cleanses the temple and declares himself to be the new temple. He is the new locus of worship, the place where people meet with God. The third Passover comes at the end of the story, at the time of Jesus' death. Not only is he the new temple; he is the new sacrifice. (This second Passover here in chapter 6 fits between the first and third.)

Passover lies at the very center of Jewish identity. Like the Fourth of July is for Americans, Passover for the Jews is a rallying point for nationalistic zeal. At Passover, when God sent a plague upon Egypt, killing the firstborn, God's people were saved by the act of sprinkling the blood of a lamb on their doorposts. This was the event that finally began the exodus of his people from Egypt. Every Passover, the families of Israel reenacted the first Passover by gathering in their households to eat flesh and drink wine in celebration of their deliverance from bondage. Passover also commemorated the giving of Torah at Mt. Sinai. After Moses had led the people through the sea and into the wilderness he went up on a mountain and received the Law from the hand of God.

Here in John 6 once again it is Passover. Jesus departs into the wilderness, and goes up on a mountain. A multitude follows. What will he do?

**Therefore Jesus, lifting up His eyes and seeing that a large crowd was coming to Him, said to Philip, "Where are we to buy bread, so that these may eat?" This He was saying to test him, for He Himself knew what He was intending to do. Philip answered Him, "Two hundred denarii worth of bread is not sufficient for them, for everyone to receive a little." (6:5-7)**

Observing the large crowd coming to him, Jesus asks Philip where would they find bread to feed everyone. Jesus was saying

this to “test” Philip. This was a pop quiz. He wanted to know how Philip would respond to a situation in which the apparent resources were no match for the need. Although Philip had been watching Jesus and the signs that he had performed, he responded to the test with little or no faith: “Two hundred denarii worth of bread is not sufficient for them, for everyone to receive a little.” One denarius was a day’s wage. Even 200 days’ wages would not be enough for everyone to receive a little. Philip gets an ‘F’ from his teacher.

At this point Andrew comes up with a suggestion.

**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 these for so many people?” (6:8-9)**

Andrew has something to offer Jesus. He observes a young boy with five barley loaves and two fish. Barley loaves were the food of the poor. The early church used such loaves for the Eucharist. The fish were probably pickled, to be eaten as a side dish with cakes. Andrew observes, “but what are these for so many people?” His is a small but genuine response of faith struggling against a background of skepticism. One can identify with Andrew’s response: Let’s try and do this without spending any money.

An interesting note is that of the four gospels only John mentions Philip and Andrew. They were prominent in chapter 1, where we learned that Philip was from nearby Bethsaida. Only John’s account has Jesus taking the initiative instead of the disciples. The story in Mark 6 indicates that the crowd had run around the north shore of the lake. Mark says that Jesus taught them, and had compassion on them.

Now we come to the feeding of the multitude.

**Jesus said, “Have 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 having given thanks, He distributed to those who were seated; likewise also of the fish as much as they wanted. When they were filled, He said to His disciples, “Gather up the leftover fragments so that nothing will be lost.” So they gathered them up, and filled twelve baskets with fragments from the five barley loaves which were left over by those who had eaten. (6:10-13)**

Jesus instructs his disciples to make the people sit down. The men numbered five thousand. There were probably twenty thousand people present. The timeframe was probably March or April, so there was plenty of grass. Like our own Bay Area in spring, the grass was still green; the summer sun had not yet done its work.

Jesus gives thanks for the food, probably using the common Jewish blessing, “Blessed are you, O Lord our God, King of the universe, who brings forth bread from the earth.” Jesus blesses God, not the food; then he distributes the bread and the fish. The Synoptic gospels record that Jesus acted through intermediaries. The people ate as much as they wanted and

were filled. He then tells the disciples to gather the leftover fragments, a Jewish custom that prevented waste, and twelve baskets of fragments were collected. Twice the text says that the fragments “abounded,” the literal sense of “left over” in vv. 12 and 13. There was more than enough. There was an abundance, a lavish supply, in contrast to what the little boy had to offer or what 200 denarii could purchase. There was more than enough for all of Israel, all twelve tribes. Perhaps there is an allusion here to 2 Kings 4:42-44, when Elisha multiplied the bread. Jesus is a prophet greater than Elisha.

This brings us to the reaction of the multitude.

**Therefore when the people saw the sign which He had performed, they said, “This is truly the Prophet who is to come into the world.” So Jesus, perceiving that they were intending to come and take Him by force to make Him king, withdrew again to the mountain by Himself alone. (6:14-15)**

The people’s reaction to the sign is to assume that Jesus is the prophet, the one promised in Deut 18:15, a prophet like Moses. Caught up in the Passover excitement they want to make Jesus king. Passover is a celebration of deliverance, a time when God does amazing things. Jesus is doing what Moses did. The crowd is thinking, if we make Jesus king, then maybe he can deliver us from the Romans, like Moses delivered us from Egypt.

Jesus’ responds by making a quick exit. He knew what they were thinking in their desire to make him king. This was not a sign of faith but unbelief. Jesus is the prophet like Moses, and he will deliver God’s people. Jesus will build a kingdom and he will be king, but it will be on his terms. His actions will not be based on defeating the enemy in siege warfare, but by dying and being raised from the dead. He will not be the instrument of any human program. So he leaves the crowd and his disciples and goes away to the mountain to be alone with the Father.

What do these events signify? John assumes that the reader knows the history of God’s people. In the Exodus story, his people were delivered out of Egypt, saved from the death of their firstborn, and led by Moses through the water into the wilderness. There God gave them manna from heaven, providing an abundance each day, and no one lacked.

In the wilderness God tested his people. They murmured against God and against Moses. Finally, Moses went up on Mt. Sinai and received the Law, the Torah. God did amazing things in the wilderness, and Passover recalls all of these events. At Passover Jews ate the sacrificial lamb and partook of the covenantal meal. Passover marked the giving of Torah, the time when the Jews expected God to act on their behalf.

Now in John 6, the Passover story is repeated. Jesus takes a multitude out into the wilderness and feeds them with bread, manna from heaven. The bread is given in abundance and there are twelve baskets of fragments left over. Before Jesus feeds the multitude he tests his disciples to see if they will

rely on him and trust him for food. Like Moses he goes up on a mountain, but instead of giving the law he will give life through the Spirit. In the next section Jesus will bring his disciples through the water to safety. No wonder the people were in such a fervor to make him king.

All of these references and images point back to the old Exodus and forward to the new exodus. Jesus is the new Moses. He delivers and gathers to himself a new people, not from Egypt but from Israel. There are twelve disciples, twelve baskets, and twelve new tribes, signifying that there is a new Israel. Jesus feeds his people supernaturally in the wilderness. He is the bread of life, the true bread that must be given for the life of the world. Jesus is the Lamb of God whose blood saves from death. He fulfills Passover, and the Eucharist replaces the Passover meal. At the end of the third century a rabbi commented that “as the former redeemer caused manna to descend . . . so will the latter Redeemer cause manna to descend” (Rabbi Isaac, *Ecclesiastes Rabbah*, on Eccl 1:9).

And the story is repeated again in us. It is our story. Our journey with Jesus is a new exodus. God delivers us from the bondage of sin and death. He takes us through the water and gives us new birth. He leads us into the wilderness, the place of testing where we must depend on him. And now we must feed on him to satisfy our hunger. The true bread from heaven far outstrips the manna in the desert. The covenant meal is now his flesh and his blood.

As we contemplate our journey with Jesus in the new exodus let us dwell on the three facets of this journey that define our lives.

First, there is the journey out. For Israel, it was a journey out of Egypt, where they were held in slavery. In John, the journey is away from Jerusalem, where God's people were also held in slavery. We begin our exodus with a journey away from slavery either to sin or to law. God calls some of us out of the world system, where we are held in bondage to sin. God calls others of us out of a religious system, where we are held in bondage to external law-keeping. In both of these kinds of slavery we experience death. God calls us out of bondage to experience life and freedom.

God calls us, and we begin a journey out. We must detach ourselves from the things from which we sought to find life. Sometimes we must let go of possessions. Sometimes we have to sever unhealthy or damaging relationships. Sometimes we have to leave sports or jobs that have consumed our lives. Sometimes we have to separate ourselves from home or the place where we want to belong. When I became a Christian I had to leave a community of fraternity brothers and partygoers to develop a new community and new friendships. This is a hard time for us. We want to return to Egypt or Jerusalem, to what we were used to. But we must keep moving away, detaching, letting go.

Secondly, there is the journey in. We leave one system to enter another. We detach from one life to attach to a different

life. We journey into Jesus and feed on his life. He is the one who feeds us with the bread of heaven. “Man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by everything that proceeds out of the mouth of the LORD” (Deut 8:3). Jesus multiplies the loaves. Later in John 6 he will say that he is the bread of life. He is the covenant meal. We, his followers, must eat his flesh and drink his blood.

In the old system from which God called us we fed ourselves with the food of the earth. To be sustained and filled we ate and drank what the world or the church offered. Like Philip, we looked at the things we could buy with money to satisfy our souls. But that food and drink never satisfies. The journey in demands that we eat and drink Jesus and fill ourselves with the food that he offers. This is real food that will fill and satisfy us. It is never enough for us to leave our old life or to sell our possessions. We have to enter into this life of Jesus. “I will fill the soul of the priests with abundance, And My people will be satisfied with My goodness,” declares the LORD” (Jer 31:14).

Finally, there is the journey down or the journey inward, to the wilderness, where we are tested. Notice that in John's account of the feeding of the five thousand Jesus is focused on the disciples. He sits down with them on the mountain to teach them, not book knowledge, but how to live in the kingdom of God. He asks Philip a question to test how far his faith in him has grown.

When God led Israel out into the wilderness, even though he had provided for his people, this was an occasion of murmuring and of testing. Psalm 78 recounts the first Exodus with the two motifs: God's provision and Israel's murmuring:

**And in their heart they put God to the test  
By asking food according to their desire.  
Then they spoke against God;  
They said, “Can God prepare a table in the wilderness?  
Behold, He struck the rock so that waters gushed out,  
And streams were overflowing;  
Can He give bread also?  
Will He provide meat for His people?”  
Therefore the LORD heard and was full of wrath;  
And a fire was kindled against Jacob  
And anger also mounted against Israel,  
Because they did not believe in God  
And did not trust in His salvation.  
Yet He commanded the clouds above  
And opened the doors of heaven;  
He rained down manna upon them to eat  
And gave them food from heaven.  
Man did eat the bread of angels;  
He sent them food in abundance. (Ps 78:18-25)**

God tested Israel in the wilderness to see if they would rely on him to provide for them. In John 6, Jesus tested Philip to see if he would respond with faith. God tests us, too. We are confronted with situations in which there are no visible resources for us to depend on. We must have faith in God

and his provision. We can't prepare for these tests. He springs them on us, revealing our heart. He examines our faith. Will we base our life on what we see with our eyes or what we see with our heart?

I have had many of these tests and I have flunked many of them. It dawns on me after the fact, and I cringe and acknowledge to myself that I failed. It was because I was looking at what was visible, not at what was invisible. But God's purposes are nothing like those of mean-spirited university professors. God isn't trying to flunk us out – just the opposite, in fact. He is trying to get us to depend on what he will supply. He wants our faith in him to deepen. God describes his time with Israel in the wilderness in Jeremiah 2 as his sweetest time with his people; it was like a honeymoon with his bride. He is trying to perfect our faith as he did with Abraham when the patriarch went up on Mt. Moriah to sacrifice Isaac.

Daily and weekly we are confronted with circumstances beyond our abilities. The secret to life is to offer what we have in the moment and trust that God can multiply in abundance. This is how the church is designed to function. We face many

problems and issues, but these will not be solved by committees or money. God will provide as we step out in faith. God perfected Abraham and he perfected Philip, and he will do the same for us.

Where are you in your exodus story? Maybe God is calling you to detach yourself from something or someone. Perhaps he is calling you to himself, to feed on him and find your satisfaction in his lavish supply of grace. Or maybe he is testing you, giving you an opportunity to wait on him and deepen your trust in him. Our exodus journey is not a once-and-for-all thing. Daily we face different aspects of it. We are always detaching and always entering into Jesus. Our faith is always being tested and stretched. But if we know the story, the Exodus story, then we can be confident in what God is doing in our lives and how he is calling us to follow him today.

1. Mitch Albom, *The Five People You Meet In Heaven* (New York: Hyperion, 2003), 196.

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