



## BREAD FROM HEAVEN

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 Mark 6:30-44  
 18th Message  
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In the aftermath of the recent tragic events of our world, a number of people have asked us to address the issue of the mystery of suffering. Many are asking such questions as: Why does God allow innocent people to be overrun by evil? and, How do we reconcile the sovereignty of God with the justice and goodness of God?

Let me respond by making three observations. First, questions like these are appropriate and valid. God takes them seriously. In the midst of my own suffering I have asked them myself. Second, when the world of our forefathers in the faith, Job and Jeremiah, collapsed, they too wrestled with these questions. As they struggled to understand these issues they grew spiritually, becoming more human in the process. And third, despite their arduous and agonizing wrestlings with God they did not receive philosophical answers. What they received instead was a personal encounter which transcended their pain and allowed them to live with the mystery. Thus Job's story ends with the words, "I have heard of You by the hearing of the ear; But now my eye sees You" (Job 42:5). The encounter was enough.

In like manner, Isaiah's prophetic word came to a tiny, war-torn remnant of grieving exiles who had been forced from their land. The prophet promised them a holy encounter so wonderful that he described it in terms of a "new exodus": "When you pass through the waters, I will be with you" (Isa 43:2). "Do not fear, for I am with you" (Isa 43:5). At times the chaotic waters of evil may leave their banks and seek to drown us but, just as in the first exodus, God, the great "I AM," will descend to be with us. In his presence we have nothing to fear, not even death itself. This is what we need to hear in the midst of our suffering, not a philosophical response that removes the mystery, but a divine encounter that transcends it.

The message of the New Testament is that Israel's long awaited exile is over and the new exodus has arrived in Jesus. And, just as in the Old Testament, the gospel stories don't give a philosophical answer to the mystery of evil. What they do instead is announce that in Jesus the door is now thrown wide open to enable mankind to encounter the Creator of the universe. In these intimate meetings he restores our brokenness and makes us thoroughly human again, even in the midst of a violent world. This is the message of the gospel.

In this light, we resume our studies this morning in the book of Mark. Today and in the coming weeks we will be looking at how the disciples encountered this di-

vine mystery in one of the most basic acts of life, that of eating a meal. This theme of eating dominates Mark's text from 6:14 through 8:21. It has its origins in the garden of Eden. It was re-taught to Israel in the wilderness in the giving of manna; it was replayed in the temptation of Jesus in the wilderness; and now in Mark's gospel it becomes a primary lesson for the disciples of Jesus in understanding the nature of the kingdom of God.

Today's text follows immediately after Mark's report of the beheading of John the Baptist. In that graphic account we were forced to gaze upon Israel's greatest and final prophet who was not protected from the vilest evil. Following John's execution, the decapitated head of the forerunner of Jesus was served on a platter, as if it were the main course for the guests at a royal banquet. Even more horrifying is the fact that John's bloody head was presented to Herod in triumph, without a semblance of horror, by a teenage girl—his own daughter.

Before we can recover from the shock and grief of this event, Mark transports us to another banquet, the miraculous feeding of the five thousand. Our text opens with the return of the disciples from their apostolic mission throughout the cities of Israel announcing the kingdom of God.

### I. The Invitation (6:30-32)

**And the apostles gathered together with Jesus; and they reported to Him all that they had done and taught. And He said to them, "Come away by yourselves to a lonely place and rest a while." (For there were many people coming and going, and they did not even have time to eat.) And they went away in the boat to a lonely place by themselves. (NASB)**

The disciples return and report to Jesus everything they had taught about the kingdom of God and how they had cast out demons and healed many. Jesus, aware that they are spent and in need of refreshment, invites them on a quiet retreat. There they would escape the multitudes pressing in on them from every side, a rush that made it virtually impossible to attend to their most basic needs, even things like eating. So Jesus and his disciples embark in a small boat and head off to a deserted place to be alone. They are looking forward to a time of rest and solitude.

But, like many things in life, their plans are short lived. Verses 33-34:

## II. The Teaching (6:33-34)

**And the people saw them going, and many recognized them, and they ran there together on foot from all the cities, and got there ahead of them. And [when He went ashore], He saw a great multitude, and He felt compassion for them because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and He began to teach them [at length].**

It is hard for the little band to escape unnoticed. As they depart, everyone recognizes them and wants to be part of the group, so the crowds run on foot from all the surrounding cities to join them. When their boat arrives at the “lonely place,” rather than being greeted by solitude, no small city awaits them.

Mark notes Jesus’ reaction the moment he sees the throng. We are not told how the disciples felt. There is no need to ask. Between the twelve there was a wide range of emotions: disappointment, frustration, and anger, no doubt. But it was not so with Jesus. Mark says, “He felt compassion for them for they were like sheep without a shepherd.” They had no shepherd to care, protect or feed them. “Compassion”<sup>1</sup> is a strong word that speaks of a gut-wrenching sympathy that moves one to action. Usually it is used in terms that are closely related to words used for pain and crying. The greatest need of any flock is to be taught, and this is what Jesus does, and at great length, far into the day.<sup>2</sup> His compassion drives him to forget about his physical hunger and tiredness as he gives himself away with total abandon.

## III. The Feeding (6:35-44)

**And when it was already quite late, His disciples came up to Him and began saying, “The place is desolate and it is already quite late; send them away so that they may go into the surrounding countryside and villages and buy themselves something to eat.” But He answered and said to them, “You give them something to eat!” And they said to Him, “Shall we go and spend two hundred denarii on bread and give them something to eat?” And He said to them, “How many loaves do you have? Go look!” And when they found out, they said, “Five and two fish.” And He commanded them all to recline by groups on the green grass. And they reclined in companies of hundreds and of fifties. And He took the five loaves and the two fish, and looking up toward heaven, He blessed the food and broke the loaves and He kept giving them to the disciples to set before them; and He divided up the two fish among them all. And they all ate and were satisfied. And they picked up twelve full baskets of the broken pieces, and also of the fish. And there were five thousand men who ate the loaves.**

The hours march on. Morning gives way to noon, and noon to afternoon. Finally, before sunset, the topic of hunger resurfaces, the same issue which Mark introduced in verse 31. The disciples, perhaps now with no

little impatience over their unmet expectations, try to spur Jesus into action. They say: “Allow the people to leave while the market place is still open so that they might refresh themselves with something to eat.” It’s strange that the crowds don’t seem to notice either the passage of time or their hunger, and neither does Jesus.

His response to the disciples surprises us as much as it must have surprised them: “You give them something to eat!” In light of their meager resources, the thought seems ludicrous to them. In fact, by their calculation it would require about eight months’ wages<sup>3</sup> to buy even enough bread for all the wandering refugees. Undeterred, Jesus forces them to consider what lies at hand. With an even more forceful, “Go look,” ringing in their ears, they discover they have five loaves of bread and two fish. With these resources, Jesus commands the throng to recline in groups on the green grass, in companies of hundreds and fifties, “just as their forefathers were used to doing on their journey through the Sinai desert (cf. Exod 18:25).”<sup>4</sup> And, as was the Jewish custom (based on Lev 19:24 and Deut 8:10) as head of this new family, he took the bread into his hands and, looking up to heaven, blessed God, saying,

*“Blessed are you, O Lord our God, King of the universe, who brings forth bread from the earth.”*

The ancient Hebrew blessing had been repeated for generations, but now as it is uttered by Jesus, something radically new occurs. As he breaks the bread he keeps giving it to the disciples, together with the fish, and they distribute the never ending supply until five thousand men are fully satisfied.<sup>5</sup>

But the miracle does not end there. When they had picked up the remainder of the five loaves and placed them in large wicker baskets, they found they had twelve baskets in all, one for each apostle. This was no arbitrary number. It signified the feeding the twelve tribes of this newly constituted Israel in the wilderness. As Bargil Pixner writes: “Everything in this report: the site, the placing of the groups and in particular the number of the twelve baskets...points towards the fact that this feeding was meant for the twelve tribes of Israel.”<sup>6</sup>

This is very significant, since the Jews felt that after the exile, God would send a new shepherd, like Moses, who would feed his people. Listen to Ezekiel’s description of this coming one:

**“My flock was scattered over all the surface of the earth; and there was no one to search or seek for them...Behold, I myself will search for My sheep and seek them out. As a shepherd cares for his herd in the day when he is among this scattered sheep, so I will care for My sheep and will deliver them...and I will feed them on the mountains of Israel...and they will feed in rich pasture on the mountains of Israel. I will feed My flock and I will lead them to rest.” (Ezek 34:6-16)**

The Jewish inter-testamental writings, as in 2 Baruch

29:8, take the images even farther: “And it will happen at that time that the treasury of manna will come down again from on high, and they will eat of it those years because these are they who will have arrived at the consummation of time.” When would that be? Mark says the time was now! Israel’s hopes were now being realized. The Messianic age when God would raise up a shepherd to feed his flock with compassion had arrived. Jesus was the new Moses who fed Israel manna in the wilderness (Exodus 16); the new David who took five loaves and fed his army in the wilderness (1 Samuel 21); the new Elisha who fed his school of prophets twenty loaves and had some left over (2 Kgs 4:42-44).

It is very important to understand that Jesus’ miracles were not arbitrary acts of wonder. These events were deeply imbedded in Israel’s story. The reason for this is that God raised up Israel from Abraham to be the “new Adam” to restore our lost humanity. But Israel failed, just as Adam had failed. As Adam was exiled from the garden, so Israel was exiled from her land to await full restoration. Now Jesus is taking upon himself Israel’s role, and fulfilling Israel’s hopes and dreams by creating a new Adam (Rom 5:14) and a new humanity (Eph 2:15). Isn’t that what we need in the midst of our evil world—someone to make us human again?

So what did this feast in the wilderness teach the disciples of Jesus? And what does it teach Christians today about what it means to be human? In a word, hospitality. The highest calling of our humanity is to invite others and serve them at this feast. As we are attentive to Jesus in this story we discover three things: First, what motivates us to serve; second, what we serve at the feast; and third, when and where can we expect this feast to take place.

#### **IV. Will You Serve at this Feast?**

##### **A. What motivates us to serve?**

Notice that it was compassion that moved Jesus to forget about himself and serve others. A gut-wrenching sympathy drove him into action. He was teaching his disciples that being human means to be consumed with a divine compassion that overrides our natural appetites so that we love with abandon.

The new humanity lives to feed others, not themselves, and miraculously trusts God to feed them through the very means by which they feed others, making every meal a divine encounter. As the new Adam, Jesus himself received such training early in his ministry. After he was overcome with physical hunger in the wilderness he was tempted by the devil to “turn these stones into bread,” implying that if he was to be the new Moses, then he must do what Moses did and bring forth manna from stones. The subtle temptation was that Jesus use his office to feed himself. But he refused, saying, “Man does not live by bread alone, but by everything that proceeds out of the mouth of God” (Deut 8:3). Then, when the devil had left him, the angels

came and “ministered to him.” This is the same term used in Acts 6 of serving tables; literally, they “served him” heavenly food.

This lesson would become essential for the apostles. At the end of John’s gospel we find Peter back at his old trade of fishing, attempting to feed himself. But on the shore stands Jesus, who has already prepared breakfast for him. During that holy meal, Jesus emphatically reminds him that if he truly loves him, he is not to feed himself, but “feed my sheep.” Jesus was saying, “You feed my sheep and I’ll feed you.” How radically different this is from the spirit of the age that we encounter in Silicon Valley!

This leads us to a second question: What do we feed them?

##### **B. What do we serve at this feast?**

Notice that there were two feedings here. First, Jesus fed the people from the word of God, then he had the disciples feed them bread from heaven. I wonder if in fact Jesus actually had the disciples act out physically what he had just done spiritually. One was a feast in fact, the other in symbol. Together they make up the true feast, which is the word of Christ and the body of Christ. That is what satisfied them. Let us never forget that. When people are starving we must not feed them the opinions of men, the banter of the talk shows or the whirlwind of media chatter. And we must not entertain them. We must give them the simple, unadulterated word of God. That is what satisfies.

Around this time last year when I was weary and in need of rest, our board of elders graciously allowed me to take a sabbatical from preaching for the past eight months. During that time I felt it necessary to get back to basics to restore my soul and feed my spirit. I discovered that two little things did more for my renewal than anything else. The first was taking time each morning to read and meditate on one psalm. One psalm, a small meal, satisfied me for an entire day.<sup>7</sup> The second thing I did was take communion often. Taking time to have communion with family and friends anytime and anywhere created some wonderful memories of intimacy. This is the true feast, the word of Christ and the body of Christ.

##### **C. When and where can we expect this feast to occur?**

This wondrous feeding of a second Exodus did not come about according to the predetermined plans of men, nor did it occur on the artificial stages of the world. It happened in the isolation of the desert, in response to a divine interruption, and at a time where the disciples had few resources and were at their physical end. That is the time and place when we are most likely to hear the voice of Jesus saying to us, “Feed them.” The best news is that Jesus allowed the disciples to do no fund raising; instead they used the meager resources at hand. And in amazing simplicity, with the blessing of Jesus, in the giving of the bread and in the hearing of the word, physical hunger abated, time stood still, and

that tiny hill became awash with heaven. This happens again and again.

A good friend who is a gifted pastor-evangelist had been planning a much needed vacation with his wife, but some weeks ago he wrote me to say she had taken ill and they had to cancel their plans. He was pained and disappointed. On a recent Tuesday morning, around the time when they had planned to leave, he saw about twenty police cars rushing by his office. He got in his car and came upon the tragic scene at Columbine High School. Overcome with compassion, he gave of himself with abandon at the scene. His church threw open its doors to the Denver community. At first, eight hundred, then a thousand people came to pray. On the following Sunday, twenty-five hundred attended services. At the first memorial service for one of the victims, John Tomlin, five high schoolers received Christ. Then the church opened their larger facilities to the local Methodist church, and a high school teacher shared the love of Christ. Today is youth Sunday at their church. No one knows how many young people they will feed today. Bill wrote: "Pray for us. We're all weary and exhausted. Sleep is hard to come by. Eating habits are disrupted. We're a community of grieving shepherds, but we know that God is with us. We want to continue to present his message with power and conviction."

On a larger scale, think of the multitude who have been fed with eternal life by the testimony of twelve young martyrs and one teacher in Littleton. Perhaps a whole nation. Cassie Bernall gave testimony to her faith just before she was shot. My friend wrote that a hundred students received Christ at her memorial service. According to the *Boston Globe*, on the night of her death, Cassie's brother Chris found this poem which she had written just two days prior to her death:

Now I have given up on everything else  
I have found it to be the only way  
To really know Christ and to experience  
The mighty power that brought  
Him back to life again, and to find  
Out what it means to suffer and to  
Die with him. So, whatever it takes  
I will be one who lives in the fresh  
Newness of life of those who are  
Alive from the dead.<sup>8</sup>

I don't understand the mystery of evil. I don't understand the death of these twelve students, the plight of the refugees in Kosovo, or the death of John the Baptist. But I do know that in Christ there is a heavenly feast, and the world is very hungry. The only question is, Will compassion move us to feed them?

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1. C. E. B. Cranfield (*The Gospel according to St Mark* [Cambridge University Press, 1959] 216) notes that in the NT, *splagchnizomai* is used only of Jesus, apart from three occasions on which it occurs on his lips with reference to figures in parables that have a close connection with himself.

2. Cranfield, 217, notes that the "many things" Jesus taught them more than likely adverbially means "at length": "the meaning is not that Jesus taught them a great number of different things, but that he taught the one message of the kingdom of God persistently."

3. Cranfield, 217, notes that "a denarius is the wage for a day's work in a vineyard."

4. Bargil Pixner, *With Jesus Through Galilee According to the Fifth Gospel* (Rosh Pina, Israel: Corazin Publishing, 1992) 71.

5. Cranfield, 220, notes that Mark's choice of words makes this note emphatic in the text and notes also Ruth 2:14; 2 Kgs 4:44; 2 Chron 31:10.

6. Pixner, 72.

7. I supplemented my reading of the Psalms with Derek Kidner's *Commentary on the Psalms* (IVP). Kidner's work is outstanding. Each sentence is carefully composed as if it were poetry.

8. Quoted from Chuck Colson, Prison Fellowship Ministries, 1999.