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Matthew 14:13 - 14:21



Gospel of Matthew - Steve Gregg

In Matthew 14:13-21, Steve Gregg discusses the miracle where Jesus feeds a crowd of 5,000 men, along with women and children, with just five small loaves of bread and two fish. Gregg points out the importance of this miracle in demonstrating Jesus' ability to provide for his followers in miraculous ways, and notes that attempts to explain away such miracles as mere coincidences or natural events miss the point. Rather, this miracle and others like it serve as reminders of Jesus' power and authority, both to satisfy physical needs and to nourish the soul.

Transcript

Returning to Matthew 14, and I'm going to begin reading at verse 13. Now, in the first 12 verses of this chapter, which immediately precede what I'm about to read, we read of the death of John the Baptist. When Herod had John beheaded, John's disciples, who were still loyal to him, came and took his body and gave him a dignified burial.

And then they went and told Jesus. And that's the last we read in verse 12. In verse 13 it says, when Jesus heard it, meaning when he heard of the death of John the Baptist, he departed from there by boat to a deserted place by himself.

But when the multitudes heard it, they followed him on foot from the cities. And when Jesus went out, he saw a great multitude, and he was moved with compassion for them and healed their sick. And when it was evening, his disciples came to him, saying, This is a deserted place, and the hour is already late.

Send the multitudes away, that they may go into the villages and buy themselves food. But Jesus said to them, They do not need to go away. You give them something to eat.

And they said to him, We have here only five loaves and two fishes. He said, Bring them here to me. And he commanded the multitude to sit down on the grass.

And he took the five loaves and the two fish. And looking up to heaven, he blessed and broke and gave the loaves to the disciples, and the disciples gave to the multitudes. So they all ate and were filled.

And they took up twelve baskets full of the fragments that remained. Now, those who had eaten were about five thousand men, besides women and children. This is obviously one of the more famous miracles of Jesus, feeding the five thousand.

And actually, when we call it the feeding of the five thousand, that's not exactly correct, because we read there were about five thousand men, plus women and children. Now, from what we read of the Gospels, we don't know what the proportions were in the crowds that followed him, of men, women and children, but the indication seems to be that women were almost as numerous in the crowds as men were. And if men and women were both there, their children were probably with them too.

And therefore, their children would need to be fed as well as both the men and the women. This being so, if the number of men alone was about five thousand, then the total number of the crowd may well have been in excess of twenty or twenty-five thousand people, depending on how many children were per adult. But if there were only an equal number of women and men, there'd be ten thousand.

And then if each couple had only two children, that would bring it up to twenty thousand. So you can see this is a very large feast, and Jesus fed them with only a few fish and loaves. And this is a marvelous miracle, obviously, and for that reason, it is very well known.

But it may be surprising to you to learn that it is the only miracle, of all the miracles Jesus did, that is found in all four of the Gospels. Matthew, Mark, and Luke contain much common material, and most of the miracles of Jesus are reported in at least two of these Gospels, sometimes in all three. But only one miracle of Jesus, and I would be excluding His resurrection in this consideration, because the resurrection of Jesus is also in all four Gospels, but only one miracle that Jesus performed during His lifetime is in all four Gospels, and it's this one.

And yet, it doesn't really seem to be the most astonishing of His miracles, and it's not necessarily the most significant as near as one could tell immediately, but there was more significance to it than immediately meets the eye, and I'd like to talk about that. Now, the story begins with Jesus hearing about the death of John the Baptist, and when He heard of that, He went out by boat across the Sea of Galilee, hoping to reach a deserted place. That's exactly what it says.

He went by boat to a deserted place by Himself. Now, this would not be entirely by Himself, because He took the disciples with Him, but the point is He wanted to get away from the crowds. Why? Was He afraid that Herod might kill Him too? Not likely.

At a time considerably later than this, the Pharisees told Jesus that Herod, in fact, did want to kill Jesus, and suggested that He ought to get down to Judea, which would be outside of Herod's jurisdiction. And Jesus showed no concern about it at all. He said, You

go tell that fox Herod that I'm going to continue doing what I'm doing for a few more days, and then when I'm done, I'll go where I want to go.

And essentially, Jesus was not afraid of Herod. So why did Jesus go off to a deserted place by Himself when He heard of the death of John? Almost certainly, it would be for mourning. John was His friend.

John was His partner in ministry. John's death was, in a sense, a precursor of His own death. In fact, John was even a relative.

John and Jesus had appeared in ministry together at about the same time. They had commended each other. They stood together against a corrupt age and against a corrupt religious system.

Their presence in Israel was the declaration of a new epoch, because the coming of John the Baptist had been predicted in the Old Testament, just as the coming of Jesus the Messiah was predicted. And now one of these two was gone, and the one who remained felt the lack. Now it would not be He and John who stood against the corrupt system.

It would be just Jesus and whatever disciples He could keep loyal to Himself. And I believe that He missed John. And I believe that He, like most people who lose a friend, wanted to spend some time alone and just kind of meditate, mourn a little bit.

In any case, Jesus left the crowds. He headed off by boat across the Sea of Galilee into the parts beyond the sea. And He intended to be by Himself.

But when the multitudes heard it, they followed Him on foot from their cities. That is, they walked and ran up around the northern end of the lake, so that when Jesus got to the other side, there they were. Now, Jesus was not in a mood to teach and to heal at this time.

That's why He was trying to escape the multitudes. He was probably tired. He'd been spending His energy a great deal healing everybody, teaching everywhere He went.

He was now, I think, emotionally seeking some solitude. He wanted some privacy. And when He got to the place where He hoped to have some privacy, He found there would be no privacy for Him because the multitudes, and as it turns out, tens of thousands of people, had anticipated His arrival there and had gone there and were waiting there for Him.

And when Jesus went out and saw the great multitude, that's when He got out of the boat and saw how great a multitude had come waiting for Him, what did He do? Did He get angry? Did He say, listen, folks, I've been healing your sick for days now without a break. I'm entitled to a little relaxation. Besides, I just lost one of my good friends.

He just died, and I'd like to have a little time to myself if you don't mind. Well, that's not what Jesus said. It says, when Jesus saw the great multitude, He was moved with compassion for them, and He healed their sick.

Jesus never was one to whine about His lack of privacy, about His lack of free time for Himself, recreational time for Himself. He had come for one thing, and one thing only. That was to do the will of His Father.

Sure, He had His preferences. He would have preferred to get some time alone on this occasion. However, He wasn't here for relaxation, and when it was clear that He was not going to get any because there were people in need, He was moved with compassion.

He wasn't moved with anger toward them for preventing Him from getting any privacy or solitude. He saw their needs and was compassionate and had mercy upon them, and so He ministered to them some more. Now, it says, when it was evening, His disciples came to Him saying, This is a deserted place.

In other words, there were no cities around, and thus there were no places where people could purchase things like food. And the hour is already late, they said. Send the multitudes away that they may go into the villages and buy themselves food.

That is, if they didn't break up the meeting quickly, they probably would not be able to get to any of the villages because they weren't very nearby before closing time of the shops. I mean, at sundown, pretty much, they rolled up the streets in these villages. They didn't have electric lights and so forth, so basically business ended, the business day ended when the sun went down.

And they said, Listen, it's getting late. The sun's going down. These people are not very near to any of the villages.

It's going to take them some time to get there. We better shut the meeting down so they can go and get some food. And Jesus essentially said, Well, tell you what, I don't like to shorten meetings.

I don't like to cut my teaching short. Why don't we just feed them here? That way we don't have to close the meeting. Jesus said, You give them something to eat.

They don't have to go away. Now the disciples saw this as a ridiculous suggestion. First of all, Jesus and his troop did not carry with them a truckload of food.

He wasn't exactly, you know, meals on wheels. He was, you know, they traveled light. They might have had a small bag of their own lunch, maybe a small bag of money for buying food for themselves.

But here was a multitude the size of the population of a small city. I mean a small city by

today's standards, a very large city by those standards. Let us imagine there were probably around 20,000 people, if not more.

And Jesus said, Why don't you give these people food? Well, it seems so crazy to the disciples because they quickly did an assessment of how much food could be obtained. And what they found was that they only had five loaves, and these loaves were not big loaves like when you buy a loaf of bread at the store. It's not like the loaves they had.

These were more like muffins, five little muffins and two fish. And these fish were small fish also. And he said, Well, bring them here to me.

Now we don't have the details of the story here that we get in some other places. In John, for example, where Philip is one of the guys who's actively trying to put this meal plan together. And he finds out, Andrew or Philip finds out that there's a young boy who had some food.

And these five loaves and two fish actually were this boy's food. And we, of course, everyone who goes to Sunday school hears the story about the little boy who shared his lunch. However, the little boy hardly figures into the story in some of these narratives.

He's not even mentioned in Matthew. But the point is that all the resources the disciples were able to find, even among the crowd, was a very tiny amount of food, maybe enough for one or two people, but not enough for the multitude. In fact, in the Gospel of John, chapter six, where this story is told, one of the disciples said, Lord, 200 denarii wouldn't be enough to buy food for all these people.

And he's talking about basically a working man's wage for about two thirds of a year would not be enough to buy food for all these people. Now, Jesus was unruffled. They had a little bit of food.

He said, bring that to me. Then he commanded the multitudes to sit down on the grass. And he took the five loaves and the two fish.

And looking up to heaven, he blessed and broke and gave the loaves to the disciples. And the disciples gave to the people. So they all ate and they were filled.

And they took up 12 baskets full of the fragments that remained. Now, those who had eaten were about 5,000 men besides women and children. So Jesus took this small amount of food and he gave thanks for it.

He was thankful for it, although it seemed really inadequate. When you sit down to a meal, if it's not the largest meal that you could wish for or the most tasty meal you could wish for, do you feel naturally thankful? If you have guests coming over and you have to feed a family or two and you don't have enough food on hand, do you give thanks for what little you have? Well, Jesus did. He had a huge group of guests to feed and he had

very, very little money, very little food.

But he gave thanks for what he had. And he blessed it and broke it into pieces. And he gave it to his disciples.

Now, Jesus didn't go out and feed the people by his own hand. He gave the food to his disciples and they gave it out. Jesus still provides for his people today.

And I don't believe that any person who's following him will end up without any necessary things that they need. And I know in my own case that God has provided for my family for 30 years without us having any kind of guaranteed income at all. But we've never lacked a necessary meal.

We've never lacked a necessary thing. Jesus is the provider. However, it's very seldom that the money or the needed thing came directly from the hand of Jesus by a miracle like manna appearing on the lawn.

The way that Jesus provides for his people is through his other people, through the disciples. He gave the bread to his disciples and they gave it to the rest of the people so that Jesus ministers to the needs of his people through the hands of his other people. And that is pretty much the way he always does this.

It's very seldom that God will cause flour to materialize in the bin each day. That happened once in the Old Testament, in one case. It happened for several days in a row, but it was still one case, one miracle for one situation.

But that's not very common. Usually God provides our needs through the hands of other people, his people. And so he gave these things to his disciples and they handed them out.

And the people had plenty to eat. In fact, they were full. In fact, after they were all full and could eat no more, they gathered up the fragments and those fragments comprised 12 baskets full.

Now, I don't know if the number 12 is significant here. It doesn't just say, well, there were several baskets full. It does give the number.

And we know that 12 is also the number of the disciples. I think since we know that the five loaves and two fishes came from a little boy who offered them, it must be that since that's all the food the disciples had, they were not even carrying enough for themselves. They weren't carrying enough food to feed themselves.

And when they told Jesus to send the people away to buy food in the villages, they were probably starting to feel hungry themselves and maybe thinking, well, if we can end this meeting, we can go to the villages and buy some food too. As it turned out, Jesus had

the disciples serve the multitudes. And then when they had finished serving, the fragments that were left over provided a whole basket of food for each of the 12.

That is, they got to eat their food last after they had served. But after they did serve, Jesus made sure they had plenty for themselves as well. Now, we can find a lot of things helpful to us in this story.

Certainly one of the things we learn from it is that Jesus is not limited in terms of his ability to feed his people. Even if resources, naturally speaking, seem to be lacking, he can take what few there are and multiply them. Or he can, of course we know, he can create out of nothing.

But the point of this story is that, at least one of the most basic points that is obvious, is that Jesus can feed us even when it doesn't seem like there is enough to go around. And I think that is very important, especially when we think of the times that obedience to God may seem to put us at financial risk. God is not really worried about financial shortages.

He can multiply things. And he does know how. And he has done it many, many times.

He hasn't always done it like this miracle where he actually takes bread and makes one loaf of bread into maybe thousands of loaves of bread. But what Jesus does do is provide for his people any way that it needs to be done. And this miracle shows that there is really nothing to prevent him from doing so.

There are other lessons in this story, and I want to talk about them. But I should comment, first of all, on the fact that there are attempts made by people who are not really believers to explain away the miracles of Jesus, to take instances like this and make it seem like it really wasn't a miracle at all. There are people who do not believe in miracles, but they believe that these stories about Jesus have some substance and some basis in some fact.

And they say, well, this story did happen, but it wasn't really a miracle. You need to understand. It doesn't necessarily say Jesus multiplied the loaves.

It just says he blessed them, he broke them, he gave the loaves to his disciples, and the disciples gave them to the multitudes, and everybody was fed. Now, this seems to leave room for some other maybe explanations of how this happened other than a miracle. Now, the Bible makes it very clear, as you read the parallel accounts of this story and the other Gospels, that the people, after it was over, marveled at the miracle that was done.

And the Bible clearly says that Jesus worked a miracle of multiplication, as you consider the other parallels in the other Gospels, especially John chapter 6. But there are some who say, well, you know, what really happened here wasn't a miracle, but it was very touching because, they say, most people in those days carried food with them. And they

wore these bulky robes with flowing sleeves and so forth, and they actually carried their food in the extra space in their sleeves. And they were bound at the wrist so that the food wouldn't fall out.

And this is basically how people carried their food, but it was unobserved by most. And this is how they argue it. When people began to get hungry, most of the people did not want to bring their food out for fear that there wouldn't be enough to go around and that others would be asking for it.

So they kept it concealed in their sleeves. However, when one little boy surrendered his food and gave it to Jesus to help people out, this act of generosity melted the hearts of the selfish and greedy people who had food stored up. And so they got their food out, and they began to share it with everybody.

So that really this little boy offering his food was just sort of breaking the dyke so that the flow of food from everybody who had food began to be shared. And therefore, the generosity of one led to the generosity of many, and it was a heartwarming thing. It made everyone feel good, and a good time was had by all and so forth.

Now, I mean, that's a very interesting suggestion. The only problem is that the Bible doesn't agree with it, especially in John chapter 6. It tells us that when Jesus had done this, the people marveled at the miracle that he had done. And the multiplication of loaves is not the most striking miracle Jesus did.

That Jesus could multiply food is not only something we might assume from the many other miracles he did, but also he did it again later on, and he fed 4,000 on a later occasion. This is sort of a signature miracle, and the reason he did it is because he was exhibiting something spiritual. And that is that he is the bread of life.

This is not brought out here in Matthew's account as it is brought out in John, because Jesus the next day was accosted by these people who wanted him to feed them again, and he said that they need to eat the true bread that comes down from heaven, which is him, and that he is the bread of life, and that people need to not only be concerned about physical food, but spiritual food that leads to eternal life. And when Jesus did this miracle of providing bread for the multitudes, it was a sign and a symbol of him providing himself as the spiritual bread for all the multitudes of the whole world. Jesus' miracles often had this symbolic value, and that was certainly the case in the case of this miracle, and we can know that simply by considering the parallels in John.

Jesus is the nourishing food for the soul, and the person who doesn't have Jesus does not have life. Just as you will not survive physically if you do not eat physical food, if you do not receive Jesus Christ in the capacity that his Father has sent him as Lord, as Savior, as King, then you will not have spiritual life. And that is the message that Jesus really intended to convey here.

Whatever else it may tell us about God's ability to provide for our physical needs, it's really a lesson about the spiritual needs of man, and how Jesus is God's answer to that, to the spiritual hunger of every man.