

Miracles of Jesus 12-07-29a

This is Sunday, the 29th of July, 2012. We continue our study of the miracles of the Lord Jesus with the feeding of the 4,000. Having looked at the feeding of the 5,000 last week, we have just a few concluding and comparing remarks that will reach back to what we saw last time.

Let's take a moment at the outset to pause and reflect on the provision that God has made for us through the presence of His Holy Spirit, the preservation of His Word, and our opportunity to gather together and study it and to seek out its meaning and to look for and pray for its application in our lives individually and as a group. Shall we pray? Father, thank You for this day and for all of the ways and means that You have employed to provide for us, to sustain us, to challenge us, to bless us, and to give us this opportunity to share time together. We fellowship in our common faith and the communion of truth that we learn from Your Word that we value, that illuminates our path, that defines us and gives our lives meaning and purpose and definition.

We thank You for this passage of Scripture, the record of the words and the works of the Lord Jesus, and what a privilege it is for us to have these things passed down to us by faithful men and to have the opportunity to be nourished and built up through Your divine power which is inherent in every word and in every concept, every expression of truth in these wonderful passages we study. We ask Your blessing on us as we look at these truths and we ask that God the Holy Spirit will be our teacher, will impress them on our hearts, enable us to understand them, remember them, see their pertinence and their application as we seek to live our lives in a way that is pleasing in Your sight, that will be approved when we stand in the day of judgment, and that will equip us for service and laying hold of righteousness by faith both now and to reflect the glory of the Lord Jesus and to serve in the ages to come. We pray these things in Jesus' name, amen.

Well these feeding of the crowd miracles are very famous, aren't they? Even unbelievers would say, oh yes, Jesus, the five loaves and the two fishes. Not so prominent is the second iteration of this. Many people think, oh, that's just a corrupt and distorted version of the first, Jesus only did it once, if He did it at all.

But the story got garbled and Mark thought that it was a different story, the numbers were different, the setting was different, and so he just kind of included this. There are others that say, well, Mark is fond of doublets, he likes to have two of everything, and so he thought this would be a convenient way to get in. Two miraculous feedings, Jesus does a double portion of what the Old Testament prophet did when he fed the hundred guys with twenty loaves and the grain.

Well, all of this, in my opinion, is sort of easy and fatuous dismissal of the inspired Word of God. You often find people, as I reminded somebody yesterday, mocking what they do

not understand. Rather than making an effort to see why something might be slightly opaque or slightly unusual or might lend itself to discussion or to question, people find the quickest, easiest explanation so they can dismiss it and move on to something else.

But we are not of those who fall back to perdition, but those who, by faith and patience, delve into what God has for us and inherit the promises, a slightly expanded version of that verse. But we're privileged to have these things from God, and meat, unlike milk, takes a little bit of chewing, doesn't it? Got to chew on it. Got to work on it a little bit.

Takes some effort. Milk, it's easy. Newborn infant can suckle on milk.

But those who are mature, who are going to chew on the meat, we've got to work a little bit. Well, that's sort of the situation here, because especially when you start looking at the 5,000 and the 4,000 that Jesus miraculously fed, there are similarities and there are differences. And when we try to solve that simultaneous equation for the variables and for the unknowns, this is not grade school math.

And I am not a math guy, and as I said before we started, I haven't necessarily achieved the level of understanding I would like in this passage. I will tell you that up front. But I will tell you everything I think I have figured out, and we'll all chew on it together.

Let's begin by looking at the passage. Again, this is in Mark, chapter 8, beginning at verse 1. As is common in the Scripture, we have the setting. In those days, the multitude being very great and having nothing to eat, Jesus called his disciples to him and said to them, I have compassion on the multitude, because they have now continued with me three days and have nothing to eat.

And if I send them away hungry to their own houses, they will faint on the way, for some of them have come from afar." That wonderful country of afar, in which several of you dwell, watching us remotely, picking us up by recording. Come from afar. So his disciples answered him, how can one satisfy these people with bread here in the wilderness? He asked them, how many loaves do you have? And they said, seven.

So he commanded the multitudes to sit down on the ground, and he took the seven loaves and gave thanks, broke them, and gave them to his disciples to set before them. And they set them before the multitude. They also had a few small fish, and having blessed them, he said to set them also before them, before the crowd.

So they ate and were filled, and they took up seven large baskets of leftover fragments. Now those who had eaten were about four thousand, and he sent them away, immediately got into the boat with his disciples, and came to the region of Dalmanutha. Well, we have a parallel in Matthew chapter 15, verses 32 through 39, and there is enough difference in the telling that we might want to flip over there right quick and just get that perspective.

This is sort of a stereo view we get. These are the two gospels that record this miracle. So in Matthew chapter 15, verse 32 and following, now Jesus called his disciples to himself and said, I have compassion on the multitude, because they have now continued with me three days and have nothing to eat.

I do not want to send them away hungry, lest they faint on the way. Notice the common elements. I have compassion on the multitude, because they want, they lack.

They have continued with me three days and have nothing to eat. Whatever they brought with them, they might have thought that they would come for a full day of teaching, maybe an overnight, but by the third day, they are going to be out. They will have used up not only their main provisions, but all of their snacks and their leftovers, and they have just got nothing left.

It reminds you of the aircraft that, you remember the Doolittle raid and some of the other things in World War II where they would start from a remote base or aircraft carriers or whatever it was, and try to get to Japan or get to their target. But if you want to land safely, you have got to leave yourself enough fuel to get back. You are going there heavily loaded, so you do not have to have half of your fuel to get back.

You are going to be a light plane, and you can get by on slightly less than 50 percent of your fuel because you are not hauling the bombs you dropped. But give or take, you have got to have enough fuel in the tank to get all the way back. Well, if you do as some of our heroic airmen did and expend more of your fuel to ensure that you get to the target and ensure that you accomplish your mission, you look at the gas gauge and realize that you are going to have to ditch.

You do not have enough fuel to get back. Jesus looks at these people, and they have stayed. They have stuck by for the teaching and for the presence of the Lord Jesus in their region for three days, and they do not have the fuel to get all the way back and make a safe landing.

And Jesus says, I do not want to send them away hungry, otherwise they will faint on the way. This use of the word lest, by the way, this phrase, I will not go into all of the technicalities, but you remember when it says, seeing they will see and not perceive, hearing they will hear and not understand. The heart of this people has grown callous.

Otherwise they would turn and I would heal them. It says lest they would turn and I would heal them. Well, it is the same idea.

The lest here really means otherwise. So his disciples said to him, where could we get enough bread? I am in Matthew now again, 15:33. The disciples said to him, where could we get enough bread in the wilderness to fill such a great multitude? Jesus said to them, how many loaves do you have? They said, seven and a few little fish.

We get the fish mentioned up front here where we did not in Mark. So he commanded the multitude to sit down on the ground. And he took the seven loaves and the fish, gave thanks, broke them and gave them to his disciples.

And the disciples gave to the multitude. So far the major distinction is that Matthew has Jesus processing the bread and the fish together. Mark separates them out.

So they all ate and were filled and they took up seven large baskets full of the fragments that were left. Now those who ate were 4,000 men besides women and children. We did not have a mention of the women and children in the other passage.

And he sent them away, got into the boat, came to the region of Magdala, which in the other was Dalmanutha. So, and again, this is going to be one of those Gerasa, Gadara, situations. So, fairly similar, details are sort of consistently presented.

What's going on here? Well, again, as we did last time, we look back at the context. Where is Jesus when this crowd gathers to listen? Well, in Matthew, if you're still in chapter 15, you can see that Jesus is up in Tyre and Sidon. In Matthew 15, chapter 29, Jesus departed from there, which is the region of Tyre and Sidon.

You remember the woman that says even the dogs can get the crumbs that fall from the children's table and so on. He's up in Tyre and Sidon, manifestly Gentile region up there. Jesus departed from Tyre and Sidon, skirted the Sea of Galilee and went up on the mountain and sat down there.

Well, when he came to the Sea of Galilee, which way did he go? He's coming from Tyre and Sidon, which is in the north. So, when he hits the sea, is he skirting the sea in a westward direction or in an eastward direction? Well, if you go back to our Mark passage and look in its preceding context, verse 31 of chapter 7 of Mark, again, departing from the region of Tyre and Sidon, he came through the midst of the region of Decapolis to the Sea of Galilee. So, this tells us that he took the eastern skirting path.

You remember Decapolis is on the eastern side of the Sea of Galilee and the Jordan. He's been over there before. This is where the legion thing took place.

They said, depart from our land, way down south in Decapolis, down on the south southeast corner of the sea. Well, he's now more on the northeast corner of the Sea of Galilee, but this is the region of Decapolis. What do you know about Decapolis? Mostly Jewish, mostly Gentile.

What would you think? Mostly Jew, mostly Gentile. Decapolis, right? Ten cities, large Roman presence. Are there some Jews over there? Yes.

You remember going all the way back to the days of Joshua, there were a couple of tribes that said, you know, we really kind of like it over here. And you get down into the

Gideon story and so on in that place and time. But we're up a little bit.

But this is not down near the Jerusalem, Jericho area crossing. This is up with the whole Sea of Galilee interposed between these people and Judea, that current day Israel. So, what's going on? What's going on with Israel? What sort of crowd do you think has gathered here and sticks around for these three days of teaching? Interesting.

What kind of crowd? What kind of crowd did we have before in the feeding of the 5,000? Where was he then? You remember? The crowd is largely Jewish. This is, if you're in Mark, just go back to chapter 6, verse 30, the apostles gathered to Jesus, told Him what they had done. They tried to go to a deserted place by themselves.

And the multitudes saw them and knew Him and ran there on foot and ran there before. These multitudes that saw Him and know Him, what kind of multitudes are they? The ones He's been circulating with, healing and teaching and so on. So, these are Jewish multitudes.

He's up north. He's up in the Capernaum area. And so, you have the 5,000 being fed by companies of hundreds, 100 companies of 50 and so on.

Five loaves, two fish there. Here we've got the seven loaves and an unknown number of fish. So, these are the backgrounds.

This is the detail. Now, already we have to start chewing here. You can't even think about this without immediately harking back in your mind to the 5,000, right? I mean, it just, as soon as you see it, you think, wow, another crowd of people that are hungry.

Slightly different reason. How long had the first crowd been listening to Jesus? And what time of day was it? He'd been teaching them all day and it was the evening, right? And they say, well, there's no nearby town where we can go and buy bread and so on. This group has been there three days.

Three days. So, just by comparison, you would say, this is a really interested, dedicated crowd. What else do we see emphasized in the second crowd that we didn't have drawn out in the first? When you go back to the feeding of the 5,000, you get to, for example, Mark 6, verse 44.

Now, those who had eaten the loaves were about 5,000 men. About 5,000 men. Here we have the women and children mentioned when we get to the Matthew account.

And so, these people are slightly more visible. The women and children are more visible. So, what are we to think about this? We start by thinking about the purpose of miracles in general.

What are they for? What does a miracle do? We're in the midst of a study of miracles.

Why did God intervene in a supernatural way in the Old Testament? These are the first miracles that people have really seen in centuries. The last miraculous... How many miracles did John the Baptist perform? Not a one.

When is the first time people have seen miracles in this time? It's the Lord Jesus. When's the last time they saw them? You've got to go back to the days of Elijah and Elisha, really. So, this is centuries, centuries, and centuries.

And if you look at the history of humanity going all the way back to Adam, how often do miracles really occur? History is more punctuated with miracles than seasoned with them, isn't it? You don't just find in every generation there's a miracle happening somewhere. We just don't see that. From Adam and Cain and Abel and all the generations down, how many miracles took place between Adam and the flood? You'd say, well, the flood itself was a miracle.

Well, sort of. But miracles that are demonstrations of divine power through human agency for purposes of demonstration, how many have between Adam and Noah? Did God miraculously drop the ark out of the sky? Noah would have liked that. Oh, Lord, I'm in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation.

Their imagination is only evil all the day. Behold, Noah, a flood is coming. Get thee into this and down it comes.

Built by the angels. Guaranteed, or your money back. Didn't happen.

He had to build it himself. How many miracles attended the generations of the patriarchs when you get down to Abraham? You start seeing some miracles, don't you? You've got the miraculous birth of Isaac. Any others? Think of any others around there? Abraham, Ur of the Chaldees, Isaac, Ram in the thicket.

Convenient, but not necessarily miraculous. With Moses? I'm in the patriarchs. I haven't got to Moses yet.

Good thinking, but we're not there yet. Patriarchs. Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

How many miracles? You've got Jacob throwing the striped sticks into the water and the spotted and speckled sheep. Interesting, but not a compelling, inexplicable demonstration of divine power. You've got enablement.

You have provision. You have the angel coming. But in terms of a miracle of the order that we see Jesus performing, here are some people.

Stand up. Stretch forth your hand. Take up your bed and walk.

I touch your eyes. You are blind. Now you see.

Peace be still. When did the waves instantly calm? When does this sort of thing really come into its own? Moshe. I deliver people out of bondage, and there are miracles in the land of Egypt.

Three sets of three, nine miraculous plagues on the Egyptians, culminating in the tenth and unique death of the firstborn, which is fraught with meaning. Jesus is the firstborn. It is in and through the death of the firstborn that Israel is delivered.

You say, well, but Israel's firstborn didn't die. Why? Something else died a substitutionary death to redeem the firstborn. Let's say that this wasn't feasible.

You can't sacrifice a Passover lamb. How would Israel have been delivered from the land of Egypt? Did you ever think about this? In what shape would Israel have been delivered? They could have still been delivered without the Passover. But what would it have cost them? God says, you can come out, but the firstborn of every family is mine, and I'm taking them tonight.

Egypt lost their firstborn and got no deliverance. Israel was delivered. They also paid the firstborn price, but they paid it in a substitutionary way.

And it is the Passover lamb that stands in for the firstborn of every Israelite family. And God says from now on, every firstborn animal, every firstborn son belongs to me. They are mine.

And if you want to keep them, they must be redeemed. And there is a redemptive sacrifice for every firstborn. The firstborn animals, they get sacrificed.

Every newborn animal that opens the womb, the first one from this heifer or this she-goat or whatever it might be, sacrificed to the Lord. You can't keep the first one. It belongs to God.

Firstborn males in every Israelite family for centuries had to be redeemed by the blood of an animal. It is the price of salvation. So when Jesus comes and He is the perfect firstborn, His substitutionary death delivers everybody out of the Egypt of sin and slavery to sin and bondage in the kingdom of darkness.

And by the way, some of that is in this preceding context if we had time to look at it. So there is a spate of miracles. The plagues followed by miraculous provision, water from the rock as was noted, manna from heaven.

Some miracles more healthy for them than others. The flock of quail looked good but wasn't. Raising up the serpent in the wilderness.

The parting of the Red Sea, Reed Sea, Yom Suf, parting of the Jordan. Fire and hail for Joshua. Many, many miracles.

But what is going on at the same time as all of these miraculous manifestations? A whole new dispensation. A whole body of teaching. You have the books of the law.

You have the history of mankind. God's take on everything from creation to and through the delivering and creation of the people of Israel into a nation. Delivering the people, creating the nation.

And accompanying this to confirm and to verify the divine source of this truth and God's messengers of that truth, Moses, etc., Joshua, you have miracles. So miraculous things and on down through the days of the prophets. And the law even says something that doesn't come true.

He is no prophet of mine. You have, of course, most prominently Elijah and Elisha as accompanied and characterized manifesting these miraculous manifestations of the power of God. And they are messengers, right? Messengers of the truth.

The divine power working in and through them, characterizing them, tells people this is somebody to listen to. Well, same thing with the Lord Jesus. This is what Nicodemus says in John 3. We know you are from God because nobody could do these mighty works otherwise.

So it confirms. Now, here's a question. We recently met some people from South Africa, as they say.

And in South Africa there is a very wonderful and widespread and notable wave of evangelism and attention to things of God that began back in the late 70s, early 80s. It was published in a book that came out in, I think, 1998. Faith Like Potatoes has been made into a movie that came out, I think, in 2006.

Did we get that on Netflix? I think that movie might be on Netflix. Very interesting because this is a man who was in Zambia, failed as a farmer, moved to South Africa to Zulu lands, tried to get a fresh start, had a big anger problem. His wife was a believer.

He wasn't. But he goes to church with her. He hears the gospel.

He gets saved. And it transforms him. And he is sold out for God.

And he wants to share his faith and finds out that he's got that gift. And he begins to exercise, and the book and the movie both detail, miraculous events. Native person struck by lightning, apparently dead.

He goes into the hut by himself, emerges with the person alive. Fire, accidentally set, fixing to move off of his farm and burn up the land of other people. He prays for rain.

It's the season of drought. It's not the rainy season. He prays for rain, tells his foreman, we've got to pray for rain.

The guy says, it's not the rainy season. There's not a cloud in the sky. The guy prays.

Cloud burst comes, puts out the fire. Later on, there's a sustained drought in the country. He gathers all the farmers together, great big stadium, nearly fills the thing, says we've got to pray.

They pray. He goes back and plants potatoes, which are a very moisture needy crop. Other farmers are failing, planting far more drought resistant crops.

They can't keep them alive. They can't get them to grow. He says, I'm planting potatoes, which is just the most wrong-headed thing in the world.

Hence the name of the book, which actually is a quote from an American guy. You've got to have faith like potatoes. He plants them.

He says, the thing about potatoes is you plant them and you don't know what's going on below the ground. He makes this metaphorical allusion to Christian faith. Many times we don't know what's going on.

We just trust God. We put it in the ground. Like Jesus' parable, a man plants a seed.

He goes away and sleeps and rises, sleeps and rises. What's going on is God's work. He plants these potatoes and ends up with a fantastic bumper crop in the midst of a drought.

This is wonderful. If you look around for people's response and reaction to this, it is uniformly acknowledged as really a well-done movie. This, I think, was directed by the same man who made the movie about the life of Jesus based on the Gospel of Matthew.

Some of us have seen that, and that's a well-done movie. Some Christian-themed movies are kind of hard to watch, a little on the cheesy side, a little too much sweetener, not enough substance, a lot of fluff, and a lot of happy... It's difficult. I haven't been able to get through most of them.

This one is actually watchable. I think it got a little off its course in the latter part, but that's beside the point. Here's my point.

What about miracles in the modern day? By the way, these huge assemblies and crowds and ongoing evangelism that this man, his name is Angus Buchan, B-U-C-H-A-N, Angus Buchan. His family was Scottish, but he was born and grew up in Africa. But there are healing services there, and it's attracting huge crowds.

It's a major movement. Everybody in South Africa knows who Angus Buchan is. He's been called the Billy Graham of Africa.

A lot of people here have never heard of him. I confess I hadn't really known about him

until we met... Actually, Billy Graham's pastor came by to see us. They're from that area, and they mentioned it to us, and we looked it up and watched it.

I recommend it. I think it's a good film to watch, but it does raise a question. I think it raises this question in almost every believer's mind, and the answer to the question varies depending on your thinking and your background and your application of the Word of God.

To what extent should I trust God for the miraculous? Would I plant potatoes in the middle of a drought, and if so, why? Can anybody say God is a God of miracles? I'm going to pick the miracle? When do you cross the line into putting God to the test? When do you announce to a stadium full of people, I'm planting potatoes, and God will come through, and what if you plant them and there's nothing there at the time of harvest? Have you been presumptuous? Have you assumed facts not in evidence? Have you trusted God for something that God has no intention of fulfilling? It's a real interesting thing to wrestle with. Or is God always ready to do miracles, and the reason He doesn't do them in my life is I just don't have enough faith. I'm too much of a skeptic.

I'm too much of a wilting violet. I'm just a pansy, and I just trust Him for safe things and stuff that's kind of indistinct, and I don't really know if it was a coincidence or if God did it, but I can never trust Him for a biggie. I could never say, here's a fire.

I'm going to pray for rain, and lo and behold, here it comes. Do you know what I mean? Is what I'm saying making sense? How far do we go? We believe God is in His heaven. We believe in every miracle the Bible ever records, but when, where, and how would I or should I personally trust God for a miracle, a miracle healing, a miracle provision, a miracle solution to a problem? I'm not talking about fortuitous or wow, look how the circumstances just kind of fell into place.

I'm talking about rain out of a clear blue sky, potatoes out of parched earth. I will say also that meaning no disrespect, but oftentimes I am cautious about taking an account of modern day miracles at the face value with which it is offered, and I don't mean any disrespect or any mistrust or even necessarily skepticism so much as caution. I think many times people believe that what they are telling is true, but I also know that the fish gets bigger every time you tell the story, and it gets a little more amazing when this particular little detail gets left out and this one gets a little bit exaggerated, and it's just human nature.

We love the effect of telling a good story, and sometimes even in our own mind we remember a thing as being far more profound. Something great happens. Well, it reminds me, and I'll tell a story at the expense of the Reverend Jesse Jackson.

Jesse Jackson was somewhere in the building when the Reverend Martin Luther King got shot. He was in the retinue. He was part of the people accompanying Dr. King.

Well, initially, I believe it was Ralph Abernathy was actually on the balcony with Dr. King. You can check me. That name might not be right.

I think it was Ralph Abernathy was with him when he got shot. Remember, he was out on the balcony in his apartment. Somebody shot Dr. King and murdered him.

A tragic, stupid thing. Well, Jesse was nowhere in the area. However, over the course of the years, well, actually within the course of a few days, actually in the course of a few hours, Jesse Jackson showed up with blood on his sweater and said that he had cradled Dr. King in his arms as he lay dying, that he was right there when he got shot.

Well, again, I believe it's Ralph Abernathy said, I was on the balcony. I was with Dr. King. I didn't see Mr. Jackson anywhere, and he's told that story a lot of places, but he's never told it to me, but the thing has grown and as Jesse Jackson has sort of attempted to cover himself in glory by being that close.

Well, maybe he believes that in his mind that he was just so close and he just kind of remembered it more and more distinctly that, oh, well, I think I was there. I was there. In fact, I was right there when he died.

In fact, I think I was, John Lovitz has a great routine if you've ever seen him on Saturday Night Live where he just keeps talking until he convinces himself of a complete fabrication. Well, we have this tendency. This is my point, and so I don't mean to be critical or disparage or to doubt the sincerity of people who tell miracle stories.

I'm just cautious because I wasn't there, and I know our human tendency. For all I know, these things happen exactly as described, exactly as depicted, but the question remains, for me, that's great for you. God may be doing miracles in Africa.

God may be doing miracles in South America. God may be doing miracles in other believers' lives. It all boils down to you and me.

Where do we stand? Should we be expecting and asking and trusting God in the area of really supernatural interventions into the normal course of affairs in life, not providences where God has built it into circumstances and people. He can put things in people's hearts. He can arrange for a confluence, and you get the idea that this was all really set on its rails in the past, and I couldn't see it coming, but God already had it in the works.

Before you ask, I will answer type of things, or where there's going to be a drought, and there's going to be nothing coming out of the ground, but I get on my knees. I pray. I stick a potato in the ground.

I wait a couple of months. I go back and dig it up, and there's a bustingly big potato there, specifically because I prayed and God did a miracle type of thing. Is this legitimate? Is this something we need to grow up to be able to achieve, or is it off the

mark? I'll leave you with that question while we pause and take our break.

We're going to look at the miracle of the 4,000 in the light of the miracle of the feeding of the 5,000 in our second session this morning. I think we will, if not answer that question, at least find some good clues to the answer. Let's pause here and take our break.