

Notes for the Ones Called-Out to Meet

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Jesus Multiplies Food and Walks on Water

by Dan Trygg

Aside from the resurrection, the multiplication of the loaves and fishes is the only miraculous sign recorded in all four gospels (cf. Mat. 14:13-21; Mk. 6:30-44; Lk. 9:10-17). If we believe that God inspired and directed the writing of the New Testament, we are driven to pay special note to that which He felt was important enough to repeat for emphasis. As is often the case, the apostle John gives us a different side of the story than the other writers. **The bread of life discourse that follows (vss. 22-71) is unique to this book, and adds insight into the significance of this miracle.** Both the multiplication of the food and the walking on water clearly exemplify a breach, or overruling, of the normal observed laws of nature, however. God's hand was clearly seen in physical, non-subjective events that could not be explained as coincidence, or mass hysteria, or any other imagined human explanation.

The setting for the miracle: Since the events of chapter five, they had traveled again to Galilee (vss. 1-4). Jesus was very popular, due to the miraculous signs which He was doing. John also mentions another Passover, which means that **an entire year had passed since the events of the previous chapter.** Matthew's version informs us that the following conversation took place in the evening, **...at the close of a long day** (14:15). **Jesus and His disciples had crossed over the sea by boat, probably from Capernaum (cf. v. 17), to the area around Bethsaida** (Lk. 9:10; cf. Matt. 14:15). This was a distance of over three miles by boat, four or five by land. This would have taken several hours, or more, to traverse. **The crowds not only had traveled that distance to be with Jesus, they had the return trip to make before they could reach their homes, too far to go in the dark.** The disciples were expecting them to need lodging as well (Lk. 9:12). The temperature could drop to fifty degrees at night in March-April, and a cool breeze from the mountains to the north would feel chilly. The mention of the Passover also may indicate that a good portion of the multitude were pilgrims on their way to Jerusalem. Returning home was out of the question for them.

Jesus tests Philip with a question, "Where are we to buy bread, that these may eat?" (vss. 5,6) Why Philip? Possibly the question was directed to him because Bethsaida was his home town (Jn. 1:44). **Philip's response was that it would require more bread than they could buy with two hundred denarii.** A denarius was a day's wage for the common man. **This sum would represent over six months' wages worth of bread, ...that's a lot of bread!** But even *that* amount would not be enough for everyone to receive even a little. **This gives us an idea of the size of the crowd. In Mark's version, Jesus told the disciples to go find out how much they had to work with.** The involvement of Andrew and the little boy is only found here in John's account (vss. 8,9). He offered his five loaves and two fishes.

John reports there was "much grass in that place" (vs. 10). This would have made reclining on the ground much more pleasant. **The men were about five thousand in number. Matthew clarifies that this number did not include the women and children present.** The actual amount of persons could easily have been triple that amount.

Details of the miracle: (vss. 11-13) Piecing together the accounts, **it appears that Jesus was breaking the bread and fish into baskets, while the disciples carried them out to distribute among the people.** Jesus told the disciples, "Gather up the leftover fragments". It was customary for Jews to gather up any leftover scraps after a meal. **Twelve baskets of fragments were more than the amount He had in the beginning!** If any missed the miracle *before*, it was obvious *now*! The matter-of-fact, quiet, but unmistakable, way in which this sign was performed makes it all the more eloquent in its impact. No sirens, bells, or whistles. The reality of what had happened spoke for itself.

The conclusion of the people: When they realized what had taken place, they thought that Jesus was the Prophet that Moses had spoken of (vs. 14). He had said, "And Yahweh said to me, '...I will raise up a prophet from among their countrymen like you'" (Deut. 18:15-19). The Jewish people had been watching for such a prophetic figure to appear (cf. Jn. 1:21; Acts 3:1-26). What the people had concluded was that *just as* Moses had given them bread (manna) in the wilderness, *so now* Jesus had also miraculously fed them bread. In that sense, they identified Him as being "like Moses" (Jn. 6:30-34).

Jesus perceived that they were intending to seize Him and make Him king (vs. 15). Matthew's version inserts that, at this point, **He compelled the disciples to get into the boat and go ahead of Him** (14:22). Their perception of Jesus' true mission was not yet clear, so they would be prone to getting caught up in the mob sentiment. **Jesus sent them off by themselves, while He dismissed the crowds.** Then, "He withdrew again to the mountain by Himself alone". He desired to spend time with the Father in prayer (Mk. 6:46).

The account of Jesus' coming to the disciples at sea by walking on the water (vss. 16-21) is also recorded in Matt. 14:22-27 and Mk. 6:45-52. From these three accounts we find out that the disciples left at Jesus' insistence

in the evening. They encountered rough weather, and were having difficulty in making progress. The wind often came from the west, and could also come rushing down the valley from the north, bringing very strong winds and storms. The transition from afternoon to evening was a common time for such storms. **Jesus came near them, walking on the water, at about the fourth watch of the night** (3 - 6 a.m.) and *intended* to pass by them (Mk. 6:48). (Note that He did not *know* what would happen! He *thought* it would turn out differently than it did.) **Upon seeing Him, the disciples became afraid, thinking He was a ghost. Jesus calmed them saying, “I am; do not be afraid.”** Many translations render Jesus’ response as “It is I”, but the Greek words that Jesus used were *Egō eimi*, ...literally, “I am”. If their minds had gone back to Job 9:8, they would have been amazed at this prophetic backdrop for claiming to be the “I am”. **Job described God as “the One stretching out the heavens alone, and walking upon the waves of the sea.”** The Greek Septuagint translation was even more clear, “...walking *as upon ground* upon the sea.”

This is the second time in the gospel of John where John records one of these “I am” statements where there is no predicate. This phenomenon has been referred to as an **“I am” absolute**. There are seven of these scattered throughout the book and they are part of John’s proof to convince us that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God (20:30,31). They are always in contexts where there is an incredible claim that Jesus makes, or where there is a miraculous display of power. (Such as *here!*) **The allusion referred to by this phrase is the Name of God from Exodus 3:14**, thus these statements are claims to Deity. **Here, after they let Him into the boat, immediately the boat was at the land to which they were going -- Another display of power, as if walking on the water was not enough!** Matthew records Peter’s abortive walk on the water also. The value of this incident is to be reminded again that **the sign itself should not be enough to convince us that Jesus is God**. The power that sustained Peter on the water, until he became afraid, was the *same power* that sustained Jesus. It was a work which the Father *gave* Him to do (5:36), and as such would be just as possible to anyone else that God would direct to undertake. The same is true of the multiplication of food. Similar things had happened in the OT at the hands of other men (I Kg. 17:8-16; II Kg. 4:1-7,42-44). In this instance, however, Peter was the only one of the twelve who was willing to take the necessary risk.

There are two errant interpretations of miracles:

The first is to think that Jesus did miracles because He was God, ...and we are not..., so we should not expect miracles to take place anymore. Of course, this ignores the language used about Jesus’ dependence upon the Father (e.g., Acts 2:22), and the teachings about the nature of the incarnation (Phil. 2:6,7; Heb. 2:17), as well as the glaring contradiction of the miracles performed by a variety of people throughout Biblical and Church history.

The second error is to think that any miraculous sign is necessarily a sign of God’s presence or His blessing. The Scriptures are quite clear that there are *false* signs and wonders that are *not* of God, but look very much like the genuine miracles which God has done (Matt. 24:24; II Thess. 2:7-12). In these cases, the Bible instructs us that we are to examine the other “fruit” of the lives of those who perform signs, i.e., their personal character, theology, and the influence they have on others (Deut. 13:1-5; Matt. 7:15-20).

Why do you suppose that this particular account of the multiplication of loaves and fishes would be included in all four gospels? What is the significance of it? I think that there are two major lessons to be learned from this story.

First, God is able to meet all of our needs. That is not to say that we may not experience hardship or hunger. The apostles all experienced the reality of both of these difficulties (I Cor. 4:9-13). The message is, however, that God *is* able to provide. Jesus made this even more explicit when, shortly after feeding another group of 4,000, He was confronted by Pharisees and Sadducees demanding a sign from heaven. After refusing their demands, He said to His disciples in their boat, “Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees.” They misunderstood His statement as referring to the fact that they had taken no bread along. Jesus reminded them how much was left over after the two episodes of multiplying food. Then He asked, “How is it that you do not understand that I did not speak to you concerning bread?” Bread was not the issue. They had seen how God could provide. He had spoken figuratively about their *teaching*, ...not at all about literal bread (Matt. 15:32-16:12). **Coming to grips with the ability of God to provide was essential for these men to leave their businesses to follow Jesus** (cf. Lk. 5:1-11), as well as for us who are seeking to follow Christ. Can we trust that God can, and will, provide for *us*, if we choose to give more to Him?

The second lesson comes from Jn. 6:27, “Do not labor for the food which perishes, but for that which endures to eternal life.” Our natural point of view is to focus on our everyday needs as our first and primary concern. The multiplication of the loaves and fish demonstrated that **there is a spiritual reality which is deeper and more significant than these temporal concerns, alone**. In Matthew 6, Jesus teaches His disciples not to be anxious about their daily needs. Those who do not know God eagerly seek these necessities, but **for us the priority should be to seek God’s kingdom, ...His reign and rule in our lives**. If we do that, He will take care of our needs (vss. 31-33). There is more to our existence than to grow up, make a living, and raise a family. We are here to serve God. **Instead of temporal concerns, we should invest in things that will endure, ...fruit that will remain** (John 15:16).