

# Together In A Lonely Place

## Matthew 14:13-21

*At God's Table, all are welcomed and fed.*

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Pastor Chuck Swindoll told a story about a nine-year-old boy named Danny who came out of Sunday School bursting with enthusiasm. He grabbed his Daddy by the leg and yelled, "Dad, that story of Moses and all those people crossing the Red Sea was great!" His father looked down and asked Danny to tell him about it.

He said, "Well, the Israelites got out of Egypt, but Pharaoh and his army chased after them. So the Jews ran as fast as they could until they got to the Red Sea. The Egyptian Army was gettin' closer and closer. So Moses got on his walkie-talkie and told the Israeli Air Force to bomb the Egyptians. While that was happening, the Israeli Navy built a pontoon bridge so the people could cross over. They made it!"

Danny's dad was shocked. "Is *that* the way they taught you the story?"

"Well, no, not exactly," Danny admitted, "but if I told you the way they told it to us, you'd never believe it!"<sup>1</sup>

Sometimes we do have problems believing all we read in the Bible. Our modern mindset is to be skeptical of anything supernatural or anything that is not scientifically verifiable.

So when we read about Jesus feeding 5,000 men plus women and children with five loaves and two fish, the question naturally occurs, "How did that happen?"

There have been a number of attempts to "explain" this miracle. One theory says that the real hunger in the deserted place was spiritual, so each person only took a bite of food, like we do at communion. Like a sacrament, this little bit satisfied the spiritual hunger of the crowd. William Barclay's famous theory on this miracle is that when Jesus asked for food to feed the crowd, everyone was greedy and kept their food hidden. But when he blessed the loaves and fishes, their hearts were turned from selfishness to generosity, and they pulled food out of their pockets and backpacks, and there was enough for everyone.<sup>2</sup>

Those explanations probably say more about us than Jesus. He was the Son of God, and he did miracles we can't explain. More than mechanics or scientific explanations, we should approach these stories with wonder and worship, and try to figure out the spiritual meaning they have for us today.

The first thing we can say is that we recognize the landscape. We all find ourselves in the wilderness from time to time, and we usually forget to bring our lunch. Life is a lonely place sometimes; it's a common human experience.

Jesus was trying to get away from the crowds and find a little solitude, but they followed him anyway. If you read this story in context, Jesus had just heard that Herod had killed John the Baptist, his cousin, and the one who baptized him. He probably wanted to get away for a bit just to process that grief. Or maybe he was concerned that Herod was about to go on a killing spree, and he might be next. Or maybe Jesus was brought again to the realization that like John, his life was going to end in brutal death at the hands of his enemies. He had good reason to be in the wilderness. He had been in the wilderness before, notably for 40 days with Satan nipping at his heels.

The crowds were willing to venture into the wilderness with Jesus because they were desperate for his healing touch. They brought their sick to him, and he had compassion on them and healed them all. They were so desperate to get to Jesus that they had run out into the wilderness without provisions, and now they were starving.

Can you relate? Do you ever find yourself a little over-extended? We know all the things that end us up in the wilderness: sickness, grief, loss, conflict, anxiety, loneliness, and fatigue. Henry David Thoreau was famous for saying in the 19<sup>th</sup> century that most people lead lives of "quiet desperation."<sup>3</sup> How much more is that true now? We are all together in a lonely place. We know well the wilderness of need.

The second thing we can say about this miracle is that the exercise of faith is a partnership. The word from Greek is *synergy*—"working together." We are partners with God in this process called life. God's grace is prevenient. God comes to us, and we respond, and God reciprocates. We are not helpless, bereft of any redeeming quality. We are not without resources to apply to the problems of life. When the disciples told Jesus that the multitudes of people were hungry, and he should send them away, how did he respond? "*They need not go away; you give them something to eat.*"<sup>4</sup> You can do this! Suddenly they found five loaves and two fish. But that was not nearly enough to feed all the hungry people.

Not to worry. When we bring what we have to Jesus, he can make it good and sufficient. Using the same words he would later use around the table at the Last Supper, Jesus took the bread, blessed it, broke it, and gave it back to the disciples to hand out. It was more than enough! When we present our meager resources to Christ for the sake of God's Kingdom, he expands our resources to meet the need far beyond what we imagine or expect. But we retain the distribution rights and responsibility. Jesus didn't hand out any food himself; the disciples did that. This is what ministry is. We offer ourselves to God; God expands our capabilities; and we share the food of faith with others who are hungry. It's like a miracle!

The third thing we can say about this story is the essence of the miracle. Everybody gets fed. In the economy of God, there is always enough for everybody. All are fed; all are welcome; all are worthy. Like the old praise song says, "It's a big, big house, with lots and lots of room, a big, big table, with lots and lots of food."<sup>5</sup>

Why is that? Why did everyone hungry in the wilderness get fed? Why can we expect that God will meet our needs today? Because God is God. God's heart is full of compassion. In the Markan version of this story, it says, "*As [Jesus] went ashore, he saw a great crowd, and he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a*

*shepherd.*”<sup>6</sup> Our God is gracious. Our God forgives our sins. Our God is a God of love. From the beginning of the Biblical story, God has provided for God’s people. When the Hebrew children were wandering in the wilderness, they cried out with hunger, and God sent them manna in the morning and quails in the evening—for 40 years!<sup>7</sup> In the midst of a severe drought, the prophet Elijah went to a widow in Zarephath, and God provided her with meal and oil that never ran out until the end of the drought.<sup>8</sup> When we are hungry in the wilderness, no matter what kind of wilderness we are experiencing, God will provide. We will have enough.

The final thing I want to say about this miracle is actually a question: What about the leftovers? Except for the stories about the death and resurrection of Jesus, this is one of the few stories that is told in all four Gospels. So we know this is a key narrative. In all four versions of the story, the writers take care to mention that after everyone had eaten their fill, the disciples took up 12 baskets of leftovers. Even the leftovers were miraculous!

Some historical commentators try to analyze the meaning of the 12 baskets as symbolic of something, but I think there are twelve baskets because there were twelve disciples, and each one took up the scraps. I don’t know where they got baskets in the wilderness, but that’s beside the point.

What did they do with the leftovers? Were they given to the poor? No, the poor were already there in the crowd. They *were* the poor. Did they put them all in Ziploc bags and refrigerate them when they got home? Not a possibility. Scripture doesn’t say. Maybe they were just wasted.

To our contemporary minds, it would have been a much better miracle (being the fine judges of miracles that we are) if Jesus had just expanded the loaves and fishes for the exact amount needed. All 5,000 men and their wives and children got just enough to fill their bellies, but not a morsel more. That would have made more sense, right?

But that’s not our God. No matter what happened to the leftovers, the 12 baskets are evidence of the superabundance of God. Our God is extravagant in grace, prodigious in providence, prodigal in love. God goes over the top in a lavish display of divinity. Did you ever notice God’s creation? There are 10,000 species of birds. Wouldn’t maybe 20 have been enough? There are 400,000 different types of flowers. Who can even imagine such a number? God can.

So when God needed to set creation right, God did not send another law or another prophet. God was born into the world in the arms of a young mother and entered extravagantly into the human condition. When the time came to redeem the world, God didn’t call down legions of angels to defeat the armies of the devil; God did not install Jesus as the King of the world. God poured out God’s lavish love and gave the life of God’s Son on the cross. God didn’t settle for a nice funeral for Jesus, maybe some fond remembrances from his friends, maybe a biography recalling his words and deeds, maybe a song in his honor. No, God reached down into the tomb with a mighty hand and broke the bonds of death and raised Jesus up to life and changed the course of history forever. That’s our superabundant God, and God’s extravagance compels us to live like we’re expecting 12 baskets of leftovers.

There was a great story a few years ago about a couple in Michigan. Christine Bouwkamp and Kyle Kramer got married in the spring of 2007. The wedding was traditional, but the reception was anything but. Instead of a dinner or cake or dancing, they

gathered their guests in the fellowship hall of the church to help distribute food to people in need.

In the weeks leading up to their wedding, Christine and Kyle decided they wanted to begin their marriage with an act of Christian service. With that goal in mind, they figured out how much money they would have spent on a more extravagant reception and instead used that money to purchase five thousand pounds of food for those in need. The week of the wedding, the couple spread the word that a truck with free food would be at the Vineyard Christian Fellowship. Immediately after they exchanged their vows, Bouwkamp and Kramer put on aprons marked "Bride" and "Groom" and joined their wedding guests in distributing food to 100 neighborhood families.

When asked about the charitable act, the happy couple simply said they wanted to "bless God for blessing us with each other."<sup>9</sup>

As we come to God's table today, we will receive a bite of bread and a few drops of juice. But there's more to it than that. Through this holy meal, we receive the compassion, grace, forgiveness, and love of God. It's not much food, but if you are in a lonely place today, stranded in the wilderness of your experience, it is enough. If you are hungry for the assurance of your relationship with God, it is enough. If you are grieving the loss of someone or something significant in your life, it is enough. If you are needing direction and purpose for your life, it is enough. If you are wanting to find a way to make a difference as a disciple of Jesus, it is enough. It's not much food, but by the miraculous power of Jesus Christ, it is enough. Come to the Table; you are welcome here.

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<sup>1</sup> Sermons.com.

<sup>2</sup> William Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew, Volume 2, Revised Edition* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1975), 103.

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/8202-the-mass-of-men-lead-lives-of-quiet-desperation-what>.

<sup>4</sup> Matthew 14:16.

<sup>5</sup> Kelly Nickels, Mick Cripps, Philip Lewis, Steve Riley, Tracii Gunns, "Big House," Capitol CMG Publishing, Songtrust Ave, Universal Music Publishing Group, 1993.

<sup>6</sup> Mark 6:34.

<sup>7</sup> Exodus 16.

<sup>8</sup> I Kings 17.

<sup>9</sup> Anne Cetas, "Serving Together," *Our Daily Bread* (June 2008).