

The Shepherd Feeds His Flock

Mark 6:30-44

ABC 3/26/23

Open your Bibles to Mk 6 as we continue our study through his gospel. Today we come to what is probably the best known of Jesus' miracles, the feeding of the 5k (Mk 6:30-44). This is the only one of Jesus' miracles, besides His resurrection, that's included in all 4 gospels. Of course, there are those who say it never happened. The *Jesus Seminar* was formed in 1985 to judge Scripture & determine what was true or not, specifically the works & sayings of Jesus recorded in the gospels. They came with the preconceived idea that there's no such thing as divine, supernatural intervention in history. Here are a few of their conclusions about Jesus:

- He was born during the reign of Herod the Great & His mother's name was Mary.
- He had a human father whose name may not have been Joseph.
- He was born in Nazareth, not in Bethlehem.
- He practiced faith healing, relieving psychosomatic disorders.
- He didn't walk on water, change water into wine, or raise Lazarus from the dead.
- He was executed as a public nuisance, not for claiming to be the Son of God.
- The empty tomb is fiction; Jesus wasn't raised bodily from the dead.

When they came to the miracle of Jesus' feeding the 5,000, they even explained how natural interpretations could be given. These explanations ranged from the bizarre to the ridiculous. The worst is that Jesus carefully prepared for this event by deviously filling a cave near the Sea of Galilee with a large supply of loaves & fish. When it came time to feed the people, the disciples formed a bucket brigade, passing loaves & fishes to Him through the back of His robe, which He then distributed to this crowd that were gathered in front of Him. In other words, the feeding of the 5,000 was a hoax performed by a con man. Another, explanation was that when Jesus finished His teaching, the people were tired & hungry. Jesus told those who had brought food to share with those around them. According to this, the miracle was of people sharing with one another.¹ Another contends that *rich & pious ladies used to inquire of Him where He thought of preaching to the people on a given day, & sent baskets of bread & dried fish to the spot which He indicated, that the multitude might not suffer hunger.*² To believe any of these *explanations* is to stretch our

¹ R. C. Sproul, *Mark*, First Edition, St. Andrew's Expository Commentary, pp 138–139.

² Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest for the Historical Jesus: A Critical Study of Its Progress from Reimarus to Wrede*, pp 328–29, citing Pierre Nahor, *Jesus*

imaginations to believe the ridiculous over the clear teaching of Scripture. The feeding of the 5k took place just as Scripture says.

Notice that Mark presents back-to-back accounts of dramatic meals. The 1st was hosted by Herod, the other by Jesus. At Herod's feast, only the elite of Galilee were invited. At Jesus' feast, everyone was welcome. At Herod's banquet, the food was prepared by chefs. At Jesus,' it was prepared by His own hand. At the 1st, the entertainment was exotic dancing. At the 2nd, the 1st item on the agenda was the teaching of the truth of God by the Son of God. Finally, the climax of last week's feast was the presentation of a head on a platter. In today's picnic, the big take away is the compassion of Jesus for people who were like sheep without a shepherd. Through Mark's account of this event, he continues to answer the question: *Who is Jesus?* In our text Jesus reveals Himself to be Israel's good Shepherd who cares for His sheep, a new & greater Moses who feeds God's people in the wilderness, & the end-time King hosting the messianic banquet.³ Our passage begins with Jesus' concern for the welfare of His disciples & His call for them to get away to a *quiet* or *remote* place to get some rest (31). Tension arises when Jesus sees the needs of the people, who are like **sheep without a shepherd**, & is drawn to meet their needs. He sets aside His & His disciples' personal needs & ministers to others. He meets both spiritual & physical needs, 1st teaching & then feeding the people. **30-31**

1. Report & Rest Vss 30-32 are transitional, bringing us to the conclusion of the mission of the disciples, which began before the report of the murder of John & introducing the feeding of the 5,000. After sending the disciples out to preach & to heal, Jesus now calls them for a private time of rest, recuperation, & rejuvenation. Mark doesn't tell us how long they were on their mission, but it probably lasted weeks if not months. When the disciples returned, they **gathered together with Jesus**, possibly in Capernaum, & **they reported to Him all that they had done & taught** (30). They were undoubtedly tired from their travels, which included persecution & rejection (Mt 10:16–23). In order to give His disciples a much-needed break, He told them to get in a boat & set sail **to a secluded place & rest** (31). The work of ministry was so intense they couldn't even find time for a

³ Mark L. Strauss, *Mark*, ed. Clinton E. Arnold, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the NT, p 270

meal (31). Jesus recognized their need for rest & responded with tenderness. Following His instruction, **32**.

The boat probably belonged to some of the fishermen among the disciples. The time on the lake gave the disciples an opportunity to enjoy a short break from the pressure of the crowds. According to Lk 9:10, they sailed to an area near the town of Bethsaida. We don't know its exact location, its name, meaning *house of fish*, suggests that it was one of the many villages that bordered the Sea of Galilee. It was probably located on the northern shore of the lake, to the east of the Jordan River. Their attempt to withdraw & rest is necessary because of the crowds (31). Just as we saw back in 3:20, there's no time for them even to eat. As Shepherd & Guide for His disciples, Jesus recognizes their need for physical & spiritual renewal (1:35; 6:46; 7:24; 9:2; 14:35) & seeks to provide it. Notice that twice here their destination is a **secluded place**. The word translated **secluded** or **desolate** in vs 35 is used in the Septuagint with reference to Israel's *wilderness* wanderings. Although Mark doesn't identify the place as a true desert or wilderness (after all, they're in Galilee near towns & villages; 33, 36), his repeated use of the term (31, 32, 35) is probably meant to echo the experience of Israel in the wilderness. Just as God supplied manna to the Israelites in the desert, so Jesus will feed Israel in a *desert* place. **33-34**

2. Shepherdless Sheep Their attempt to escape the crowds is unsuccessful. Seeing Jesus & the disciples leave, & perhaps guessing where they're going, the crowd runs ahead & gets there 1st. The implication is that Jesus & the disciples aren't crossing the sea, but traveling from one point on the northern shore to another. The crowd followed along on land, keeping the boat in sight, & were able to be waiting for them when they arrived. Every experience something like that? You're trying to get away & something comes up which prevents you from doing so. Our kids used to pray really hard for you all in the week leading up to our family vacations. They didn't want something to come up that would prevent us from our vacation. That's kind of what we see here. Jesus could've ignored the crowd or sent them away. He could've got back in the boat & tried for a different location. Instead, **He felt compassion for them** (34). This is the emotion of Jesus most mentioned & it's used in the gospels only to describe Jesus. Jesus was deeply moved by genuine

concern for the crowds because, spiritually, they were wandering as lost **sheep without a shepherd**. Sheep & shepherds are mentioned throughout Scripture. &, as you know, sheep aren't the brightest bulbs in the box. In Num 27:17 Moses encourages the appointment of Joshua as his successor **so that the congregation of the LORD will not be like sheep which have no shepherd** (cf 1 Kgs 22:1; 2 Chr 18:16). It's significant that God appointed Joshua as shepherd, whose name in Greek is *Jesus*.⁴ Without a shepherd, the people will be scattered, helpless, & devoured by enemies. Without help & guidance, they're defenseless & prone to wander & get lost. David was a successful king because **he shepherded ... according to the integrity of his heart** (Ps 78:72; cf 1 Kgs 9:4). The promised Messiah from David's line was often predicted to be a shepherd over God's flock (Jer 23:1-6; Ezek 34:22-23; Mic 5:2-4; Zech 13:7). Here we see that Jesus is the ultimate Shepherd over His people (Ps 23; 80:1; Is 40:11). As **the good shepherd** (Jn 10:11), Jesus was willing to feed & protect these lost sheep (Mt 10:6), & lead them into eternal safety in the fold of salvation. Saying that the people of Israel are **like sheep without a shepherd** is an indictment of the present religious leadership of Israel, who were neglecting & exploiting the people rather than caring for them. Similar indictments of Israel's leaders as false shepherds are common in the OT (Is 56:11; Jer 10:21; Zech 10:2-3; 11:17), especially in **Ezek 34**.

Then the word of the LORD came to me saying, "Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel. Prophesy & say to those shepherds, 'Thus says the Lord GOD, "Woe, shepherds of Israel who have been feeding themselves! Should not the shepherds feed the flock? You eat the fat and clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fat *sheep* without feeding the flock. Those who are sickly you have not strengthened, the diseased you have not healed, the broken you have not bound up, the scattered you have not brought back, nor have you sought for the lost; but with force and with severity you have dominated them. They were scattered for lack of a shepherd, and they became food for every beast of the field and were scattered" (1-5).

"I will feed My flock and I will lead them to rest," declares the Lord GOD. "I will seek the lost, bring back the scattered, bind up the broken and strengthen the sick; but the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them with judgment" (15-16).

Then I will set over them one shepherd, My servant David, and he will feed them; he will feed them himself and be their shepherd. & I, the LORD, will be their God, and My servant David will be prince among them; I the LORD have spoken (23-24).

⁴ William L. Lane, *The Gospel of Mark*, The New International Commentary on the NT, p 226

Jesus now demonstrates that He is the fulfillment of these prophecies. In His **compassion**, the Good Shepherd looked on His sheep & determined to meet their need.

Jesus' **compassion** is expressed in a way you may find surprising. It's expressed by His **teaching them many things** (34). Although Mark gives less of the actual teaching of Jesus than the other gospels, he refers to His teaching often (1:21–22, 27; 2:13; 4:1–2; 6:2, 6, 34; 8:31; 10:1; 12:35, 38; 14:49). Although no specifics are given here, Luke tells us Jesus **began speaking to them about the kingdom of God & curing those who had need of healing** (9:11). Jesus' **compassion** compels Him to feed the people on the Word of God, since **man shall not live on bread alone** (Mt 4:4; Lk 4:4). In John's account, this miracle is followed by Jesus' extended teaching that He is the true manna, life-giving bread from heaven (Jn 6:25–58). Jesus not only taught the people, He also healed them. As Mt 14:14 explains, **When He went ashore, He saw a large crowd, & felt compassion for them & healed their sick**. Jesus' **compassion** went beyond the spiritual needs of people to include their physical needs as well. Jesus' ability to heal them physically was evidence of His ability to offer them spiritual healing. In other words, Jesus came to save people not just from the devastating effects of sin in the physical realm but from the eternal spiritual effect of sin itself. The physical healing He provided was limited to this life but the eternal life He offers overflows with blessings & benefits both for this life & the next.⁵ In Jesus' **compassion** He taught them for a very long time.

3. Dinner Details (35-44) **A. The Problem** It was already late afternoon, since evening won't arrive for some time (47). For a 3rd time, the place is referred to as a **secluded** or **desolate** place (31, 32, 35). The hour grew late & the disciples grew concerned. **35-36**

Perhaps we see some compassion from the disciples here. They're wondering how the people would be able to find food if Jesus didn't stop teaching & send them away to find some in the **countryside & villages**. Because they were in a **secluded place**, they'd have to travel to find food. From a human perspective, the disciples' concerns were reasonable. They didn't know where to find food for such a large gathering. They were in a remote & unpopulated area, where food was not readily available. Aware of the people's hunger, & probably being hungry themselves (Mk

⁵ John MacArthur, *Mark 1–8*, MacArthur NT Commentary, p 317

6:31), they encouraged Jesus to dismiss the multitude so they could head for locations to find dinner for themselves. Jesus had been feeding them spiritual food. Now that the disciples bring up the hunger of the crowd, Jesus tells the disciples something surprising. **37**

Jesus' words were meant to test the level of the disciples faith while forcing them to acknowledge that they had no human solution to the problem. Where could they possibly come up with food to feed this mob? Humanly speaking, the problem was insurmountable & far beyond their financial resources. The possibility that Jesus could create & provide the necessary food never crossed their minds. They were so focused on the problem, & the need to find a human solution, they failed to consider the divine power of Jesus. Remember, the context of this event: The disciples have just returned from a mission in which they've been given Jesus' own authority to teach, heal, & cast out demons (12–13). They went out on their mission without money or bag or food (8) & relied on God to provide, which He did. Apparently, that never crosses their minds. Jesus is challenging them to even greater faith & greater action but they don't see it. They answer Jesus with an apparently reasonable & practical response. **Shall we go & spend 200 denarii on bread & give them something to eat?** (37). A denarius was worth a day's wage (Mt 20:2). 200 denarii was more than ½ year's wages. This wasn't pocket change for a group of unemployed men following a wandering Rabbi. But Jesus is trying to get them to think of kingdom values & not of human economics.

B. The Miracle Now it's Jesus who gets practical. **38**

Jesus has the disciples take an inventory of the resources available & finds that, by kingdom values, it's more than enough for the crowd. In John's gospel, the 5 loaves & 2 fish come from a young boy brought to Jesus by Andrew. But Andrew asks, **what are these for so many people?** (Jn 6:9). The 5 loaves would likely have been a pita-like flatbread or biscuit & the fish would be small sardine-like fish either dried or smoked. Many have tried to make something of the numbers, suggesting, for example, that the bread represents the 5 books of Moses & the 2 fish the tablets of the 10 Commandments. Such theories are just that & are unlikely & unnecessary. 5 loaves & 2 fish are simply what was available. **39-40**

The description of seating arrangements is unusual. In language reminiscent of a banquet, Jesus orders them to **sit down** in *dining groups* or *group-by-group* which originally meant a *bed of leeks* or a *garden plot*, & came to mean an orderly arrangement,⁶ which would be necessary for an orderly distribution of food. Also unusual is the reference to the **green grass**. This could simply be an eyewitness detail, confirming the miracle occurred in the springtime, near Passover (Jn 6:4). If the reference to grass is symbolic, in light of the shepherd imagery earlier (34), it could echo Ps 23, **The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures...** (1-2). Or, if we use the messianic banquet imagery & the location of the miracle in a remote place, it could point to the future restoration, when the wilderness will bloom again (Is 35:1) & when God's end-time salvation will be symbolized as a great feast, with the finest of meats & the best of wines (Is 25:6-9). **41**

Speaking of Christ on this occasion, Charles Spurgeon declared:

*He it was who thought of the way of feeding them, it was a design invented & originated by Himself. His followers had looked at their little store of bread & fish & given up the task as hopeless; but Jesus, altogether unembarrassed, & in no perplexity, had already considered how He would banquet the thousands & make the fainting sing for joy. The Lord of Hosts needed no entreaty to become the host of hosts of hungry men.*⁷

Looking up to heaven is the posture of prayer (7:34; Jn 11:41). The Greek could mean either, *He blessed God & broke the bread* or *He blessed & broke the bread*. The former seems more likely, especially in light of the traditional Jewish blessing over meals: *Praise be to You, O Lord, our God, King of the world, who makes bread to come forth from all the earth & who provides for all that You have created.*⁸ Although this meal isn't communion (after all, it's bread & fish, not bread & wine & Jesus had yet to institute communion), the language used here would remind Mark's readers of Jesus' later institution of the Lord's Supper (14:22-25; Acts 2:42, 46; 20:7, 11; 1 Cor 10:16-17; 11:23). John's account brings these images together as Jesus identifies Himself as the **bread that came down from heaven** (Jn 6:41) & calls on the people to eat His flesh & drink His blood (6:53-58). Mark describes the miracle simply & without fanfare. Because there is no human

⁶ Mark L. Strauss, *Mark*, ed. Clinton E. Arnold, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the NT, p 276

⁷ *The Miracle of the Loaves*, sermon #1218

⁸ Sproul, p 140

explanation to a divine creative miracle, he doesn't attempt to describe how this miracle took place. It apparently involved continuous creation as Jesus kept producing meals & giving them to the disciples, who were distributing them to the people until everyone was fed.⁹

C. The Result 42-44

Despite the meager provisions provided by the boy, **they all ate & were satisfied** (42). In our situation, where few go to bed hungry & grocery stores are stocked from floor to ceiling with all kinds of food, it's hard to feel the impact these words would've had on 1st-century readers: **They all ate & were satisfied** (42). For people who lived daily with hunger pains, never eating their fill, this was a wonderful thing. The surplus of food recalls the statement made following Elisha's feeding of 100 men with 20 barley loaves: **they ate & had some left over** (2 Kgs 4:44). Is there symbolism in the 12 baskets collected? Some see an allusion to the restoration of 12 tribes of Israel. While possible, Mark makes nothing of this, & the more likely & ordinary explanation is that the 12 disciples each carried a basket picking up the leftovers, so that 12 baskets were collected. Mark concludes by identifying the number of **men** who ate as 5k. Matthew's account adds that it was **about 5k who ate, besides women & children** (Mt 14:21). This would make the total number fed more like 15-20k. I can't imagine the amount of food required to feed this many people. But it was no problem for Jesus. The disciples had to have been dumbfounded. Although no response of the disciples or of the people to the miracle is recorded by Mark, which is surprising considering how often the theme of amazement is throughout his gospel (1:22, 27; 2:12; 5:15, 20; 5:42; 6:51; 12:17), John tells us that astonished by what they've just seen, the people exclaimed: **This is truly the Prophet**, an OT reference to the Messiah, **who is to come into the world**. In their satiated state **they were intending to come & take Him by force to make Him king** (Jn 6:14-15). Obsessed with His healing & feeding power, the crowds wanted Jesus to usher in the ultimate welfare state, in which sickness & hunger would be banished. Here was Someone who could meet their every physical need. Jesus, knowing what they were thinking, **withdrew again...** (Jn 6:15).

⁹ John MacArthur, *Mark 1-8*, MacArthur NT Commentary, p 320

In contrast to the debauched banquet of king Herod, which ended in the murder of John the Baptist, Jesus, the great Shepherd of Israel, compassionately meets the needs of His people. While Galilee's upper crust feasted lavishly in Herod's palace, Jesus feeds the poor & humble in the open fields on the shores of Galilee. This event has many implications. Just as God fed Israel in the wilderness with manna through Moses, so now Jesus feeds the people of God in a **secluded place**. It also points forward to God's future banquet & its present preview in the celebration of the Lord's Supper. While these themes are alluded to in Mark, they become explicit in John's account of the miracle. When the people remind Jesus that **Our fathers ate the manna in the wilderness** (Jn 6:31), Jesus tells them that He is the **true bread from heaven** that **gives life to the world** (6:32-33; cf 41-51). This life is received by eating His flesh & drinking His blood (53-58), that is, by appropriating His atoning, sacrificial death, symbolized in Communion, & receiving His resurrection life. Communion isn't just a remembrance of things past but also an anticipation of the consummation of salvation when Christ returns, as we **proclaim the Lord's death until He comes** (1 Cor 11:26) when He will eat & drink with us in His Father's kingdom (Mt 26:29). This miracle points us to the heavenly banquet that symbolizes God's final salvation, the restoration of creation & eternal fellowship with our Creator God, when, as **Isaiah** says,

the LORD of hosts will prepare a lavish banquet for all peoples on this mountain; A banquet of aged wine, choice pieces with marrow, & refined, aged wine. & on this mountain He will swallow up the covering which is over all peoples, Even the veil which is stretched over all nations. He will swallow up death for all time, & the Lord GOD will wipe tears away from all faces, & He will remove the reproach of His people from all the earth; For the LORD has spoken (25:6-8).

In our text the failure of the disciples is subdued. They 1st encourage Jesus to send the crowd away to find food (6:35), an apparently legitimate request, & then they express dismay at Jesus' suggestion that they feed the people (37). For those with eyes of faith, these are failures, but any practical person would forgive the disciples for failing to anticipate such a miracle. Yet this unbelief is the beginning of a series of events that increases in severity, highlighting the disciples' lack of faith. When Jesus walks on water, the disciples are baffled, **Mark** says, because **they had not gained any insight from the *incident of the loaves*, but their heart was hardened (6:52)**. Hard hearts are far more serious than a failure to anticipate a miracle. Then, before the feeding of the 4k in chpt 8 (1-

13), the disciples respond in the same way, asking how they could possibly feed so many in a **desolate place** (8:4). What appears in our text this morning to be a realistic assessment of the situation now looks like spiritual blindness. Did they not remember God taking care of them on the mission Jesus sent them on & did they not remember the feeding of the 5k? The drama intensifies when Jesus warns the disciples about the **leaven of the Pharisees & ... of Herod** (8:15). They misinterpret this as a reference to physical bread because they **had forgotten to take bread with them** (8:14). Jesus then reminds them of the 2 miraculous feedings & warns them against having eyes that don't see & ears that don't hear. **Mk 8** says the disciples...

they had forgotten to take bread, and did not have more than one loaf in the boat with them. & He was giving orders to them, saying, "Watch out! Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees & the leaven of Herod." They began to discuss with one another the fact that they had no bread. & Jesus, aware of this, said to them, "Why do you discuss the fact that you have no bread? Do you not yet see or understand? Do you have a hardened heart? HAVING EYES, DO YOU NOT SEE? & HAVING EARS, DO YOU NOT HEAR? & do you not remember, when I broke the 5 loaves for the 5,000, how many baskets full of broken pieces you picked up?" They said to Him, "12."

"When I broke the 7 for the 4,000, how many large baskets full of broken pieces did you pick up?" And they said to Him, "7." & He was saying to them, "Do you not yet understand?" (8:14–21).

This indictment recalls Jesus' reason for teaching in parables & puts the disciples in danger of becoming *outsiders* like the religious leaders who are blind & deaf to the mysteries of the kingdom of God (4:10–11). The disciples seem on the brink of disaster. Will their lack of faith grow into outright rejection? Stay tuned, but you know the answer.

This miracle was more than just an astounding display of Jesus' divine nature & creative power. It demonstrated His merciful compassion & tender care. God the Son not only has the power to meet human needs, He also has the desire to do so. This is a picture of Jehovah-jireh (Gen 22:14), a name for God meaning *the Lord who provides*. Tragically, most of the people in the crowd that day would ultimately reject Jesus (Jn 6:66). Yet He generously fed them anyway providing an illustration of God's common grace in which **He causes His sun to rise on the evil & the good, & sends rain on the righteous & the unrighteous** (Mt 5:45). As the passage unfolds, the Lord provides rest for the weary, truth for the wandering, & food for the wanting.¹⁰

¹⁰ John MacArthur, *Mark 1–8*, MacArthur NT Commentary, p 313

What do we learn from this? 1) Our Savior is compassionate toward us. As our Shepherd He cares for us & provides for us. 2) It reminds us that spiritual success doesn't come through our efforts or resources, but through trust & dependence on the One who *brings forth bread from the earth*. When we face difficulties & challenges, we should look beyond our own circumstances & ask, *What could our great, almighty, saving, Creator God accomplish here?* While God doesn't call us to be naïve or reckless, He does call us to live by faith, believing that His will & purpose will be done, **on earth as it is in heaven** (Mt 6:10). 3) Jesus' desire to teach the truth underscored the fact that He is the truth (Jn 14:6). & His readiness to make bread & fish was evidence of His ability to provide spiritual food for those who hunger & thirst for righteousness (Mt 5:6). He is the Bread of Life & those who believe in Him will be eternally satisfied (Jn 6:35).

Regardless of whether you're a believer or not, if you don't believe that Jesus has tender compassion for you, you simply do not know what He is like. We read frequently of Jesus having this deep compassion. Sometimes it was when he saw someone ill & at others because of the effects of sin. Jesus has merciful compassion toward you and toward the needy world, just as He did toward the 5,000. Jesus' deep-felt compassion propelled Him among the people, and He labored long & intensely among them in self-giving ministry. Nothing is impossible physically or spiritually for Jesus Christ. No one is beyond His redemption, not even you. If you're willing, there is no moral flaw in your life which God cannot heal,¹¹ no sin which He can't forgive if you come to Him by faith.

¹¹ R. Kent Hughes, *Mark: Jesus, Servant and Savior*, vol. 1, Preaching the Word, p 149