

BIBLE BACKGROUND

Matthew 14:13-21

Verses 13,14

After Jesus heard [about John], he withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place by himself but when the crowd from the towns heard [about this], they followed by him by foot. When he disembarked, he saw a great crowd and felt compassion for them and healed their sick.

The principle reason for **withdrawing by boat to a deserted place by himself** was to evade the notice of authorities so that his mission could continue. Since his relative had been executed, Jesus was no longer safe. He was not strictly alone, for he went by boat, no doubt owned by either the Zebedee brothers or the brothers Simon and Andrew. Indeed, two or more boats may have departed.

However, Jesus could not evade the crowds who followed around the shore edge **by foot**. **When he disembarked, he saw a great crowd and felt compassion for them and healed their sick** was typical of Jesus (9:36). **To have compassion** ἐσπλαγχνίσθη literally means to have a yearning within the bowels. Jesus felt deeply for the crowd of people, which led him to deal graciously with their sick, gathered from the surrounding towns.

Verses 15-21

When it was evening the disciples came to him saying, 'This is deserted place and the hour is already late. Therefore, dismiss the crowd so that they can go into the villages and buy food for themselves. But Jesus said to them, "It is not necessary for them to go. You give them something to eat." They replied, "We do not have anything here except five loaves and two fish." He told them, "Bring them here to me." He commanded the people to sit down on the grass and taking the five loaves and two fish, he looked up to heaven, gave thanks and when he broke the bread, he distributed the bread to the disciples, and the disciples to the crowd. All of them ate and were satisfied. They collected twelve baskets' full of broken pieces left over. There were about 5,000 men without counting the women and the children.

The disciples were tired and ready to seek rest after a full day's activity. The day was drawing to a close: **the hour is already late**. They realised the people needed to eat but there were no market places nearby: **this is a deserted place**. Their solution was sensible and practical: **Therefore, dismiss the crowd so that they can go into the villages and buy food for themselves**. What the disciple expected the people to do after they had eaten is not specifically stated but having been **dismissed** ἀπόλυσον, they probably assumed they would return to their homes.

What was in Jesus' mind when he abruptly replied saying: **you give them something to eat?** First, he issued a challenge to the disciples to meet need. He had shown compassion, now it was their turn, after all, the crowd needed to eat at that moment. Responding to the crowd's need was the first concern. Jesus was expecting the disciples to act in faith rather than avoid the problem of the crowd's need for food. They could deal with the problem themselves. In Jesus' mind, they had the capacity to do this, with him in their presence. After all, it was a regular practice for them to bring food along (see below). Next, Jesus was concerned about them going away: **it is not necessary for them to go**. This was related to their need for food but rather than finding food in the surrounding villages, he wished that the crowd stay with him, to be properly looked after.

However, their vision, compassion and faith were not up to the task. All they could see was lack rather than the spiritual resources at their disposal. **We do not have anything here except five loaves and two fish**. In John 6:9, apparently the food came from a boy. The disciples had been thinking of the meal for some time and had been checking on what they had. Even amongst them, presumably the apostles, the food was insufficient.

The Lord Jesus took control of the situation, a little like Moses in the wilderness organising the great throng of people, which was done along military lines. He had challenged his disciples, now he would lead by example, telling them **to bring them here to me. He commanded** κελεύσας **the people to sit down on the grass** fits with the Mosaic images mentioned, for Jesus took control as the leader of the true Israel in that deserted place.

He looked up to heaven, gave thanks and when he broke the bread, he distributed the bread to the disciples, and the disciples to the crowd. Jesus assumed the role of the head of the household leading in the prayers of thanksgiving for the daily provision of food. He distributed the bread to the disciples, not for them to eat ahead of the crowd but for them to hand on to the people there. They had enough faith to do what their master told them.

All of them ate and were satisfied is the only description of the miracle that took place there. There isn't an explanation of how the bread and the fish multiplied or what was happening from Jesus' hands to the filling of the baskets or did the bread and fish increase within the baskets? What is significant is that the miracle met the crowd's hunger, for no one missed out and their hunger was **satisfied** beyond what they required. God provided the best and the most, much like the wedding of Cana where water was changed into the best wine in a prodigious amount. The Lord Jesus had accomplished what the disciples could not do but should have done by trusting in him.

To drive this home, each of the disciples had **a basket** each in which they collected the **broken pieces left over**. Normally, the disciples were responsible for providing their food and for those who followed him from town to town in **the baskets** they took with them (16:5). However, on this occasion, the baskets were stored in the boat but were empty.

The extent of the miracle is further described by the statement: **There were about 5,000 men without counting the women and the children.**

There is some connection to Elisha feeding the company of the prophets, though the scale of that miracle was much smaller (2K 4:42-44)