

BIBLE BACKGROUND

John 6:1-21

Verses 1-9

After these things, Jesus went across the Sea of Galilee or Tiberias. A great crowd followed him because it had seen the signs that he did for the sick. Jesus went up the mountain and there he sat with his disciples. It was near the Passover, the feast of the Jews, therefore, Jesus looked up and seeing the great crowd coming to him he said to Philipp, "Where shall we buy bread to feed them?" But he said this to test him, for he knew what he was about to do. Philipp answered him, "200 denarii of bread is not sufficient for each one of them to receive [even] a little." One of his disciples, Andrew, the brother of Simon Peter, said to him, "There is a little boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish but what are these for so many?"

A great crowd is not necessarily a fickle mass of people apt to disappear. In 3:26, they were quick to leave John the Baptist and go to Jesus baptising in the Judean wilderness. But this was seen to be the work of the Spirit (3:34). Many Samaritans also believed in him (4:42). However, there is a note of caution here: **because it had seen the signs that he did for the sick**. The miracles of Christ were **signs** σημεῖα, but the crowd was being tempted to merely observe and be impressed, rather than to believe in Jesus as the Saviour of the world.

Jesus goes up to a high point on **the mountain** but unlike Moses ascending alone to receive the word of God in a theophany, Christ takes **his disciples and sits with them**. This takes us back to chapter one where we are told that God dwells with his people in the flesh of the living Word, Jesus (1:1,14,17,18). Note, too, the contrast between the law of the old covenant Moses issued and the grace Christ grants through fellowship with his people. John also contrasts **the Passover, the feast of the Jews**, which was approaching, and this new feast about to begin. It is a feast with Jesus, a simple concept but a profound one. God is about to give everyone a glimpse of what a true salvation and completely restored union with him will look like.

A side issue occurs, prompted by **Jesus looking up to see the great crowd coming to him**: being hospitable to the many people was important not only because of Eastern values but also because of love. **Where shall we buy bread to feed them** seems a natural enough question. A single bakery was not going to supply such a large amount. **Where** πόθεν the bread was going to come from was the issue here. It was a test to get the disciples to think about the giver of bread. Who is responsible for all that we receive each day? Where is the source of the abundance in the universe? This is a test for Philipp and Philipp can only think of the cost. He cannot understand how Jesus could be contemplating feeding the crowd and asking about where the food could be obtained. However, the expression, **for he knew what he was about to do** reveals Jesus' premeditation. At this moment, Jesus can see himself feeding the many thousands around him. He understands that he is Lord over all creation, the one who is responsible for the world's existence and creator of all the paddocks, the soil molecules and the people who work in the fields and those making bread.

Verses 10-13

Jesus said, "Have the men sit down." There was a lot of grass in that place. Therefore, the men sat down, about 5,000. Jesus took the bread, gave thanks and distributed it to those lying down. He did the same with the fish [providing] as much as they wanted. When they were full, he said to his disciples, "Collect the leftover scraps that nothing might be wasted." The result was that they filled twelve baskets of pieces from the five barley loaves left over by those who had eaten.

Jesus referred to **the men** and asked the disciples **to make them sit down**. John indicates that there **were about 5,000 men** ἄνδρες, which can be translated as husbands. We are to assume that they were sitting together as family groups, the men, considered as heads of households. Eastern and

Mediterranean people reclined to eat and, no doubt, appreciated that **there was much grass**, a feature John observed in the way that he took note that the loaves were in fact, barley loaves.

The Lord is the real head of this giant family and it is he alone who can provide for them. The host has a ritualised position at the head of the table, in this case, the hillside, and presides over the food's distribution. The breaking of bread became an expression for the Lord's Supper celebrated in the Christian community. **After giving thanks**, Jesus **distributed** διέδωκεν **the bread and the fish**, that is, he broke these into pieces that the disciples took to the people in their baskets. **The broken pieces** κλάσματα, comes from the word to break, used in Acts 2:42 and elsewhere, for Holy Communion. After his resurrection, the Lord shared a breakfast of bread and fish with his disciples by the shores of Lake Galilee (21:13), again, an indication of a divinely established feast of fulfillment and joy in the presence of the Lord.

There was literally, **an abundance of left-over scraps** or broken pieces, indicating not only the generous provision of the Lord but his intention to provide life in the full theological sense, something celebrated and received in the Lord's Supper. Those present were able to take **as much as they wanted** without social embarrassment but, indeed, with joy and pleasure in what was put before them. Jesus waited till **they were filled**. The other signs of Jesus were much like this in regard to a completer or perfect action of the Lord. There was an abundance of high-quality wine at Cana (2:6,10) and a complete restoration of sight to a person born blind (9:7). There was such abundance that the **twelve baskets** (our word for coffin) each of the disciples had taken, that were empty by the end of the day, were now full, leaving sufficient for the next stage of ministry. As evening arrived, the disciples were completely helpless in the face of such a large group of people. Their faith, or lack of it, could not rise to the challenge of the people's hunger when tested by the Lord (6). Outreach is a matter of prayer, as our Lord noted in (Matt 9:37).

Verses 14,15

When the men saw the sign he did, they were saying, "He is the true prophet coming into the world." Therefore, Jesus, knowing that they were about to arrive and seize him in order to make him king, departed by himself again to the mountain, alone.

Again, **the men** are referred to because, this time, they came together and discussed **the sign** Jesus had done. Here, the miracle is interpreted by them to indicate that Jesus was the prophet Moses promised would come when God sent him (Deut 18:15). Thus, the men organised themselves and planned **to take him by force**, which Jesus **perceived** (2:24). Jesus would later say to Pilate that his kingdom was not of this world (18:36) and thus he pre-empted what they were about to do.

For some, a Messiah who provided bread would have made a desirable leader. However, many were looking forward to the coming of the Messiah to liberate them from Roman rule, to teach them in the ways of God and bring about the submission of the world to the Jewish nation and to its faith. It was this sort of domination that Jesus completely eschewed by **departing by himself again to the mountain, alone**. This was a hurried departure, which left the disciples alone with the people, whom they would dismiss and send home. There were many attempts by people to rid themselves of Roman rule and also many pretenders to the title of Messiah. The true Messiah fulfilled the role by spending time with his Father in prayer, alone on the mountain. It was a place where he could avoid the men mentioned but also, like Moses, be with the Lord.