

Introduction

I want you to think back over the last year. When did you feel most overwhelmed and exasperated? Perhaps you felt it when COVID kept schools closed again. Maybe you felt it when your spouse said you weren't doing enough. Perhaps you felt it when you lost your job and your mortgage was due.

Our second daughter Eden was born with a very severe congenital heart defect. Her short life of 110 days was by far the most trying time in my life. Melinda and I responded to it in very different ways. I tended to withdraw and isolate myself. She sought out company with other parents in the hospital. Each night she would tell me another parent's story of their extremely sick baby. I could literally feel my body shutting down when she would start telling me these stories. And after Eden passed, Melinda sought out company with other grieving parents online. I would almost involuntarily grab my phone to look for any kind of distraction so that I wouldn't have to think about the stories Melinda was telling me. I simply couldn't handle other people's problems on top of my own.

Setting

Our reading today is from John chapter 6. As far as John's Gospel goes leading up to chapter 6, John has highlighted only a few of Jesus' works. He's highlighted Jesus turning water into wine at the wedding.

This was the first sign that pointed out to people that Jesus was the rescuer God had promised.

He highlighted Jesus chasing the traders and moneychangers out of the temple. In chapter 3 he highlighted Jesus' conversation with the Pharisee Nicodemus in which Jesus describes God rescuing us as a new birth and as leaving darkness and walking into the light.

Then in chapter 4 John highlighted Jesus' conversation at the well with the woman from Samaria who had lived an extremely immoral life. Jesus told her that God's rescue would be like water that removes thirst forever.

Then John tells us about Jesus healing an important man's son without even going to the son's bedside. This was the second sign pointing out to people that Jesus was God's rescuer.

Then in chapter 5 John tells us about Jesus healing a paralysed man on the Jewish holy day of rest. This was the third sign to people that Jesus was God's rescuer. Rather than turning to Jesus and seeing him as their rescuer, however, the religious leaders tried to side-line Jesus and remove his influence.

And from there we find ourselves in chapter 6. Because Jesus has been healing people, he has quite a crowd following him. The crowds have seen the miracles as a sign that God is working through Jesus and that Jesus may very well be the Rescuer God has promised them. Matthew, Mark, and Luke tell us that Jesus was in a desolate place;

there wasn't any food around. There weren't even houses in the immediate area.

The question

So Jesus looks up and sees literally thousands of people coming to him. It seems the crowd is getting even bigger as even more people come. And so Jesus turns to Philip, who grew up in that area, and asks him where they can buy bread to feed these thousands and thousands of people.

A few years ago I took a few months to read slowly through John's Gospel. It struck me that Jesus loves to ask questions like this one. These are questions that push people to the brink. He asks questions that force us to acknowledge our inadequacies.

Well, you can just hear Philip's exasperation here. How do you buy enough bread to feed 5,000 men not counting the women and children?!? Philip calculates 8 months of a labourer's wages wouldn't even buy enough bread to give everyone a tiny morsel. And a friend of mine pointed out to me, how would you even transport that much bread from the shops back to this desolate place?

Perhaps Philip was feeling what many of us feel when our manager drops an enormous project with an impossible deadline on our desks. You take one look at the situation and already know there's no way it's going to be resolved. And if you're like me, your gut starts twisting as you start dreading how your manager will respond to your certain failure.

And what's really annoying in all of this is that Jesus never once intended to go into the villages and buy food. He asked Philip where to buy bread, but he never planned to make a purchase! Jesus already knew how he was going to feed everyone. But he asked this exasperating question anyway.

A possible solution

Next Andrew comes up. He's found this little kid who has five loaves of barley bread. I really appreciate good commentaries like Leon Morris' New International Commentary on the New Testament. Barley bread was what the poor ate because they couldn't afford wheat bread. He also has two fish. And I used to think of his food as something like in this picture.

<<Jesus Storybook picture>>

I don't think I could eat that much food, and I usually have a good appetite. He points out that this boy's food was quite small and not very filling. The fish were just tiny fish to help mask the taste of the barley bread. It was just enough for the little boy.

So Andrew brings this boy to Jesus to say, "here's some food, but seriously, this isn't going to do anything for this crowd." This really is a ridiculous solution. I almost wonder if Andrew presented the boy's lunch to Jesus with this attitude of, "Jesus, do you see now that there's absolutely no way we can feed these thousands of people?"

A flashback

I want to pause from our story and remind you of something similar that happened in the Old Testament. Do you remember when Moses led the Jews out of slavery in Egypt?

<<Exodus>>

After 10 plagues, Pharaoh finally agreed to let them go. Moses starts leading them out and gets to the Red Sea.

<<Trapped>>

Pharaoh changes his mind and sends his entire army to chase the Jews.

<<Parts>>

God parts the Red Sea. Moses and the Jews cross over safely,

<<Drowning>>

and Pharaoh's army drowns in the sea. Well, just after they crossed the Red Sea, they began grumbling that there was nothing to eat. They were in the middle of the wilderness; so there really *wasn't* anything to eat. That's when God sent manna,

<<Manna>>

this new food that tasted like honey wafers. Each day God would send enough manna that everyone in the nation could eat their fill. And

God did this for them every morning. In fact, they weren't allowed to keep leftovers for the next day as the leftovers would always spoil. This was a very important part of God rescuing his people from slavery in Egypt.

The miracle

So Jesus gets his disciples to have the crowd sit down. He thanks his Father for the food

<<Filled full>>

and then starts distributing the bread and fish to everyone. And every time he gives some out, there's still enough for the next person. The supply doesn't run out until everyone in this massive crowd is fully satisfied.

Then, to really drive home the point, Jesus sends his disciples out to gather the leftovers. The disciples went through the crowd and gathered 12 baskets of leftovers!

The response

And so the people seeing what Jesus has just done start saying to each other, "This is definitely the prophet who is to come into the world!" They're most likely connecting the dots and seeing that Jesus has just repeated the miracle of manna in the wilderness. He's given them bread

from heaven and filled them full in the wilderness. And so they see him as a great prophet.

Then the people decide to try to make Jesus their king. They want him to overthrow the Romans and set up a kingdom like King David had.

And Jesus responds by slipping away to an isolated place. He completely rejects their idea of making him king. It seems that Jesus feels the crowd has missed his point.

What does it NOT mean?

So what are we to make of all of this? What's actually happening here?

Let's start with what Jesus was NOT doing in this miracle.

1. He was NOT just trying to provide a quick fix to the problem. If his entire point was to keep some people from being too hungry, this miracle would have been far less important and probably gotten far less space in John's Gospel. And if the whole point of Jesus' miracle was to fix the immediate problem at hand, we would have a very hard time explaining why Jesus didn't solve all the hunger and sickness problems he encountered. No, Jesus was interested in something far greater than fixing a hunger problem. He's interested in a lot more than providing quick fixes to the problems in our lives.

2. He wasn't fulfilling an obligation. Jesus wasn't obliged to feed the crowds. In fact, his disciples thought it was ridiculous for him to even

explore that option. The crowds would have been happy just to see him keep healing the sick. That's why they were following him in the first place. Jesus isn't obliged to fix our problems. I sometimes wish he were, but Jesus is not a genie in the bottle who attends to our whims and desires.

3. He wasn't testing the disciples to see if they could conjure enough hope or desire or positive thoughts to bring about his miracle. If he were waiting for the disciples to impress him with their effort, this miracle never would have happened! Positive thoughts don't unlock Jesus' blessings. Digging deeper into your own efforts doesn't unlock Jesus' blessings. No, Jesus gave these blessings freely to people who didn't think it was possible.

4. He wasn't waiting for the disciples to find the solution. He purposefully gave them a problem FAR too large for them to solve.

5. He wasn't doing a miracle in order to get more followers. In fact, in the following verses you'll see Jesus seemingly going out of his way to scare off some of these new followers. Jesus isn't in the market of selling miracles and blessings in order to impress and win over more people. John 6:44 – No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him!

<<Look at verses that highlight coming only for bread and offensive verses about being the living bread that they need to eat. They came back the next day, and Jesus called them out for it. Jesus said that the

bread didn't come from Moses but from the Father. He is leading us in a better exodus.>>

Do you see that Jesus' point was so much MORE than just feeding hungry people?

So what was he doing then?

1. First, Jesus was reminding the people of the greatest rescue in their history. He did this particular miracle, and he chose to do it in such a way that it would remind people of when God made food fall from heaven to feed his people in the middle of the barren wilderness. **John 6:32-33 Jesus made it clear that his Father fed them in the wilderness; Moses didn't feed them.** Jesus was helping them recall when God had miraculously freed his people from the strongest nation on earth and then faithfully provided all of their needs afterward.

2. Second, Jesus was pointing to an even greater rescue. The people were convinced that God would fulfil his promise to rescue his people by setting up another king like David who would make the nation a great nation in the world again. Jesus wanted to do soooooo much more than that. Imagine if instead of freeing his people from slavery in Egypt, God merely made their slavery more comfortable? Maybe he could have made it easy for them to fulfil their brick quotas. Or maybe he could have made the Egyptians be kinder to his people and not treat them harshly. But God was not content just to provide a small fix to the problem; God was intent on completely changing the situation so that

the problem didn't even apply anymore. Likewise, here in John's Gospel we see the crowds wanting Jesus to be their king and to free them from the Romans. That would have felt like a great rescue, but Jesus was not content to provide that kind of small fix. He was not content to give them a comfortable earthly kingdom that still included death, sickness, and all the brokenness of this world. He wasn't going to free them just from hardship under the Romans; he was going to free them from death and sickness and sadness and brokenness.

Jesus is coming in and saying, the whole foundation on which our problems stand is false and will be overthrown. Jesus is saying that he is changing the rules of everything and our problems and afflictions are no longer rulers who can enslave us. Jesus is declaring that the Exodus is about to happen. We don't need to worry about how to make all the bricks required each day or how to make them without straw. He's not giving us a way to make bricks more easily; he's setting us free from our slave masters!

What is Jesus asking you?

I asked you earlier to think about when you've felt overwhelmed. I'm sure each of us would have very different situations. And many of you may be thinking of a situation that is drowning you right now. You didn't need me to ask you to reflect about a time you felt overwhelmed. The problem is that you can't think about anything other than your crisis right now.

I want to encourage you to think of your crisis as a question that Jesus is asking you. Jesus is asking you a question that you cannot answer. He is pushing you to a place where you can acknowledge your own inadequacy. That is a very painful place to be, but Jesus is allowing you to be there. He is taking your broken situation and turning it into an opportunity for you to know him as your rescuer.

Jesus' message

Jesus' message to those of you who have not yet put your full hope in Jesus is that he is the Saviour who wants to set you free. Do not reduce him to just a genie in a bottle. Do not expect him to overwhelm you with evidence of his claims. Jesus' message to you is that if you look to him you will find the one rescuer who can set you free from the brokenness all around you.

Jesus' message to you whose marriage is broken is that he is the Saviour who sets you free. He's not asking you to burn yourself out pursuing your spouse's approval. He's calling you to his freedom where you can love fully because you are no longer a slave to someone else's approval. This is not license to neglect your spouse; this is a call to freedom where you will be able to love fully for the first time. This is a promise that he may not fix your marriage, but he will give you a bread that actually satisfies.

Jesus' message to you who are caught in the shame of sexual addiction is that he is the Saviour who sets you free. He's not asking you

to bury yourself in shame. He's calling you to freedom where you are no longer dependent on the short lived euphoria of sex. He's calling you to freedom where you no longer feel shame and hate yourself. This is not a call to sexual hedonism. Nor is it a call to a non-sexual life. It's a call to freedom from shame so that you can find healing. It's a call to freedom from the chains of addiction and a call to a life in which Jesus heals the wounds that sex could never heal.

Jesus' message for you who find yourself in a good place at the moment is that he is the Saviour who gave you your freedom. Live in the abundance of his freedom. Fill yourself full with the good things he gives you. And when you see your friend needing Jesus, follow Jesus' model of patience. Don't just dump some spiritual truths on them. Walk with them as they struggle with questions they feel inadequate to solve.

This week I've found it hard to have my times with Jesus. I found myself much more interested in playing games on my phone.

I shared that I am still walking through my grief. Jesus' message to me is that he is the Saviour who sets me free. He did not ask me to carry the burden of every sick child and of every grieving parent. When I sit there wondering what can possibly be done to help the grieving parent Melinda is telling me about, Jesus' message is that he is coming again. And when he comes as king, he will wipe away every tear from every eye. He will raise the dead and bring life that cannot be put out. He will come back and make everything right again. He will fix this broken world. More importantly, he's the only one who can fix it!