

JESUS FEEDS THE FOUR THOUSAND

Mark 8:1-10

Key Verse: 8:2

“I have compassion for these people; they have already been with me three days and have nothing to eat.”

In today’s passage, Jesus once again shows his shepherd’s heart and compassion for a crowd of people. His compassion produced a miracle. But as always, Jesus’ miracle had a spiritual lesson we can learn from. Let us open our hearts and think about what the Lord really wants us to learn from this miracle.

Last week, we learned how Jesus continued his travel into the Gentile territories to minister to the non-Jewish people. In the region of the Decapolis, he opened a man’s ears and mouth so that the deaf and mute man could hear him and praise God. While he was there, he did one more miracle to help the non-Jewish people. He fed a crowd of 4,000 with seven loaves of bread and a few fish. In Mark 6, we studied Jesus’ feeding of the 5,000 with five loaves and two fish. The people gathered in the green hills of Bethsaida then were mostly Jewish people. This time, however, Jesus fed a predominantly non-Jewish crowd gathered on the dry ground of the region of the Decapolis. The audience was different, but the work of God among them was similar in nature. What can we learn from this miracle?

First, Jesus said, “I have compassion for these people” (1-3). Look at verses 1-2. *During those days another large crowd gathered. Since they had nothing to eat, Jesus called his disciples to him and said, “I have compassion for these people; they have already been with me three days and have nothing to eat.”* Apparently a crowd of 4,000 gathered around Jesus to listen to the word of God from him. Perhaps it was a huge Bible conference. The problem was that no meals were served at the conference. Whenever we have a Bible conference, we not only enjoy the spiritual food but also delicious meals. But these people had to bring their own food. And they were so eager to hear the word of God from Jesus that time passed by quickly, and their food ran out. They had nothing to eat and there was no fast-food restaurant or grocery store nearby. Still, they stayed with Jesus, hungry for the words of truth. They were excellent Bible students. They sought first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, overcoming their growling stomachs. Jesus did not ignore their hungry stomachs.



Look at verses 2-3. *“I have compassion for these people; they have already been with me three days and have nothing to eat. If I send them home hungry, they will collapse on the way, because some of them have come a long distance.”* Jesus said, “I have compassion for these people” What is compassion? To have compassion means to have deep awareness of the suffering of another person, coupled with the desire to help him or her. In his feeding of the 5,000, Jesus also had compassion for the people who came to him. Mark 6:34 says, *When Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd. So he began teaching them many things.* In Jesus’ eyes, the crowd was like sheep without a shepherd. They did not know what to do with their lives. They were following their desires with a tunnel vision like sheep. So Jesus began to teach them the word of God. He wanted to help them to find purpose and direction in life.

This time, he was helping the crowd of 4,000 for three days when he noticed that they ran out of food. The people did not complain about their lack of food, but Jesus was concerned about them. We learn that Jesus does not ignore our practical problems in life. He is concerned about us when we run out of our basic provisions such as food, clothing and shelter. He knows about what we go through and he is willing to help us. Jesus says in John 10:14: *“I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me.”* In fact, he promises in Matthew 6:33, “But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.” His promise is that he will not leave us alone when we seek first his kingdom and his righteousness.

We should also learn to have Jesus’ compassion for young people of our time as we help them. We should help them spiritually with the word of God as of first importance, just as Jesus did. The word of life can solve all men’s problems at the root. But we should also pray for them and help them with basic practical matters in life. We cannot ignore their reality. Jesus did not. When they are hungry, we should feed them. When they are hurt, we should bandage their wounds and pray for their healing. When they are lonely, we should be there as their friends. We have been pretty good in feeding them with physical and spiritual food. Let us also be mindful of other areas of their lives.

Jesus wanted his disciples to learn his compassion. Perhaps they had prejudice towards the Gentile people. They had to overcome this to become God’s servants. Jesus had compassion for the people, even though they demanded a lot of time from him. He was happy they stayed with him even though they ran out of food. The disciples lacked compassion toward the people, also because they were thinking about their own needs. Our compassion often wears out when we have to deal with the same problem of the same people over and over again. It is because of our selfish and self-centered nature. But Jesus saw the people with God’s mercy.

Our God is a compassionate God. This is seen in his dealing with his people throughout history. God had compassion for his people Israel. The Israelites sinned against God again and again, but God did not abandon them. Exodus 34:6-7 says the following: *And he passed in front of Moses, proclaiming, “The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. Yet he does not leave the guilty*

unpunished; he punishes the children and their children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation.”

Second, Jesus asked, “How many loaves do you have?” (4-5) How did the disciples respond to Jesus when he told them about his compassion for the crowd? Look at verse 4. *His disciples answered, “But where in this remote place can anyone get enough bread to feed them?”* Their answer shows that they made little progress since the time Jesus fed the 5,000. They again pointed out the logistic impossibility to feed the crowd. They forgot about what Jesus did before. They did not fully understand the heart of Jesus. They did not remember what Jesus was capable of doing. They were concerned about their own stomachs and their lack of resources. They didn’t take Jesus’ words seriously (17).

How about us? It is easy to talk about how the disciples didn’t know the heart of Jesus. But we need to examine ourselves here. Do we also have this “remote place” mindset? Do we automatically tell Jesus, “Lord, I cannot feed them because I am in this remote place”? Decapolis was a remote place in the minds of the disciples. We may feel the same way about where we are. But we should remember that the Pharisees who were in Jerusalem did not automatically feed God’s sheep just because they were in the city. The disciples also did not have much to share with the crowd. They were still young spiritually. They were not yet well-versed on all the details of the Scriptures. After all, several of them had been fishermen. No one had a theology degree. They did not have the material means either. They did not have much to offer. So they said, “We are in this remote place.” The religious leaders had all kinds of resources to feed their sheep. They knew the Bible well. They had the beautiful temple buildings and synagogues they could use. But they did not feed their sheep just because they had the means. The point is that it is not where we live or how much we have. It is our hearts. Jesus wants us to know his compassionate heart for the people who are spiritually hungry. When we come to know this heart of Jesus, we can find a way to feed his sheep.

What did Jesus ask his disciples and how did they answer? Look at verse 5. *“How many loaves do you have?” Jesus asked. “Seven,” they replied.* Once again, Jesus told them to start with what they had rather than focus on what they didn’t have. Jesus knew that they were in a remote place. No McDonalds was in sight. And they had no money. But Jesus wanted them to think about how to help the crowd, even when they were not in a situation to help them. In other words, Jesus wanted them to begin with a shepherd’s heart and find a way to help the crowd, not the other way around. We know that just because we have a lot of things to share with others, we don’t automatically have a shepherd’s heart for other people. If this were true, all rich people would be compassionate shepherds. In fact, we see many people with no particular means have a shepherd’s heart for others.

Recently I saw a documentary video about a woman who went to Kenya to open a restaurant. She is suffering from several health problems including high blood pressure and diabetes. But every morning she gets up to work hard, not for her own welfare but to help young people in Nairobi with severe handicaps. She hires deaf teenagers to work in her restaurant, helping them to learn to be independent both spiritually and financially. She does not have much but she has a heart for young people there. Her shepherd’s heart has already produced fruit in several young people’s lives.

Jesus did not expect his disciples to come up with a means of feeding the people by digging their pockets. He wanted them to have faith in the Almighty God (El Shaddai). Jesus was right there with them. All they had to do was to rely on him. After all, they had seen not long ago how he fed the crowd of 5,000 with only five loaves of bread and two fish.

Let us pray that we may have Jesus' shepherd's heart for young people we want to help. Let us also go and see how many loaves we have. We are not so able, rich or smart compared to some other people in our society. But we all have some loaves of bread. We have the word of God we can share—the bread of heaven. We can pray for young people. We can give them a ride. We can spend a time of fellowship with them when they need someone to talk to. We can serve a meal for them when they are hungry.

Third, Jesus gave thanks. What did Jesus do with the people, the loaves and the fish? Look at verses 6-7. *He told the crowd to sit down on the ground. When he had taken the seven loaves and given thanks, he broke them and gave them to his disciples to set before the people, and they did so. They had a few small fish as well; he gave thanks for them also and told the disciples to distribute them.* Jesus told the crowd to sit down on the ground. He wanted them to see the work of God in an orderly atmosphere, not in chaos. When he took the seven loaves of bread, he gave thanks to God. Jesus also thanked for a few small fish brought to him. Jesus gave thanks twice. Why did Jesus give thanks? Humanly speaking, it was easier to complain about the meager amount of food he had compared to the 4,000 people who were hungry. But Jesus thanked God for them. What can we learn from Jesus? We should learn to thank God for even small things. We should not take them for granted. But here, a more important reason Jesus thanked God was to help the people to realize that it was God who was about to do his work. It was a teaching moment for the people. He wanted them to know this was no optical illusion or a magic trick they were about to see. It was the work of God that he was about to do. It was to teach them who God is. It was to help them to learn to trust in God. Just before Jesus raised Lazarus from his tomb, this is what he prayed: "Father, I thank you that you have heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I said this for the benefit of the people standing here, that they may believe that you sent me" (Jn 11:41-42).

Fourth, Jesus coworked with his disciples. So God enabled Jesus to perform a great miracle of feeding the 4,000 with only 7 loaves of bread and a few fish. But Jesus did not do the work alone. It was not a one-man show. How did Jesus cowork with his disciples? He told them to do small things. He told them to search and bring what they had. He told them to set the food before the crowd. After prayer, he told them to distribute the food to the people. Look at verse 8. *The people ate and were satisfied. Afterward the disciples picked up seven basketfuls of broken pieces that were left over.* The disciples participated in the work of God by doing small things such as picking up the leftovers.

What can we learn from this? We learn that we can also do small things faithfully so that Jesus can perform miracles among young people around us. We can set spiritual food before them. We can distribute spiritual food for them. We can pick up broken pieces that are left over. Feeding a student with the word of God through weekly 1:1 is not a glamorous work. No one gives you a certificate of appreciation. It is a struggle if the Bible student does not have an open or humble learning mind. It is a small thing we can do for the Lord and for the

student. But Jesus wanted his disciples to participate in the work of God, and he wants us to participate in the work of God by doing small things. In this way, we can be God's instrument in bringing the gospel of salvation to young people of our time.

There is another point we can learn about God's work. It is our Lord Jesus who does the work of God in people's hearts and lives. We are not the ones who can transform their lives. It is Jesus. It is the work of God. It is about Jesus, not about us. This means that we don't have to feel down when people reject us. We just have to do small things faithfully. We can certainly bring our 7 loaves to Jesus and help our young friends to eat in his table.

Look at verses 9-10. *About four thousand men were present. And having sent them away, he got into the boat with his disciples and went to the region of Dalmanutha.* After the miracle of feeding the 4,000 crowd, Jesus and his disciples went to the region of Dalmanutha (also known as Magadan (Mt 15:39)) in the western shore of the Sea of Galilee.

In today's passage, Jesus said, "I have compassion for these people," hoping his disciples would have the same compassion for the crowd. Then he fed the 4,000 people with 7 loaves of bread and a few fish that his disciples brought. He asked his disciples to participate in the work of God by doing small things. He coworked with his disciples to feed the crowd. May God help us to participate in the work of God by distributing the spiritual food to young people of our time!