

“They All Ate and Were Satisfied”

The Nineteenth in a Series on the Gospel of Mark

Texts: Mark 6:30-44; Exodus 16:1-19

It seemed that all Israel is asking the same question. Who Is Jesus? King Herod wants to know, since he’s heard about this miracle-worker exorcist preaching out in the hill country near Nazareth. Herod has also heard the rumors that Jesus may be John the Baptist come back to life. This would explain Jesus’ miraculous powers. The followers of John the Baptist think that Jesus is Elijah who must come before the Day of the Lord. Many in Israel think that Jesus is one of Israel’s prophets who has returned to call the nation to repentance. Members of the Sanhedrin—Israel’s ruling religious body in Jerusalem—have accused Jesus of being demon possessed. The Pharisees think that Jesus is some sort of magician/false teacher who refuses to acknowledge the distinction between clean and unclean. The multitudes, who are seeking out Jesus, really don’t much care who Jesus is, they just want Jesus to heal them or deliver them from demonic oppression. Meanwhile, slowly but surely, Jesus is lifting the veil as to his true identity. His disciples have witnessed Jesus speak in parables, calm a storm, cast out a legion of demons, and raise the dead. Now they will witness Jesus perform a miracle which ties him to many of key events in Israel’s history. But in the end, everyone is asking the same question. Who is Jesus?

We continue our series on the Gospel of Mark. We are working our way through Mark chapter 6, in which Mark describes a transitional phase in Jesus’ ministry. After beginning his messianic mission, Jesus had been primarily preaching in the area near Capernaum on the Sea of Galilee. But the time had come for Jesus to preach to new audiences. Jesus also needed to escape from the huge crowds which had been following him every where he went—to the point of hindering his mission. Jesus’ first trip out the area was to return to his hometown of Nazareth. As yet another poignant indicator that his entire life was one of humiliation, Jesus was mocked by his former friends and neighbors in Nazareth as “the carpenter, the son of Mary.” In fact, things in Nazareth were so bad that Mark recounts how Jesus himself marveled at the people’s lack of faith.

During this same point in his ministry, Jesus gave a temporary commission to his disciples to go throughout the villages in the hill country near Nazareth to preach the gospel of the kingdom. Going out two by two, the disciples reported to Jesus that many people were healed and that demons fled when the gospel was proclaimed. It was during this time that Herod Antipas got wind of Jesus’ expanding ministry. Herod heard some of the rumors rapidly spreading throughout Israel that Jesus might be John the Baptist come back to life. This would have been especially frightening to Herod because it was he who had put John the Baptist to death at the behest of his wife Herodias. If Jesus were indeed John, he might seek revenge upon Herod. Mark uses Herod’s fear of Jesus to recount to his readers the sad fate of John the Baptist. The death of the Baptist meant that John (not Jesus) was the promised Elijah, and that although John was the greatest of men under the Old Covenant, his death was yet another, albeit tragic, sign that the New Covenant age had dawned in the person of Jesus. As the messianic forerunner, John’s work was completed. Jesus must decrease so that Jesus might increase.

As we now move further into Mark’s account of this transitional phase of Jesus’ ministry, we find that in the midst of this confusion about Jesus’ true identity, Jesus will now perform another miracle—feeding a multitude of people out in the wilderness. This miracle will demonstrate what has been hinted at all along—Jesus is not only the new Moses, the consummate covenant mediator who will lead his people in a New Exodus, but when Jesus provides the people of Israel with a miraculous provision of food in the

wilderness, this is a foreshadowing of the long-promised messianic feast and a sure sign that Jesus is much greater than Elijah and far more than a prophet. Jesus is Israel's Messiah who has come to lead his people in a new Exodus. The New Israel will eat bread in the desert and be well-satisfied.

After informing us about the tragic fate of John the Baptist, Mark now returns to the transitional phase of Jesus' ministry, when Jesus and his disciples return to Capernaum after preaching throughout the hill country to the southwest.

In verse 30, Mark tells us that "*the apostles gathered around Jesus and reported to him all they had done and taught.*" Because Jesus is a rabbi (teacher), it was only proper that his disciples come before him and give an account of all that happened when they preached the gospel. This is also the first and only time in Mark's Gospel that the twelve are specifically called "apostles." This term as used here probably has reference to the fact that the disciples have been specifically commissioned by Jesus to preach the gospel and cast out demons. In context, the term basically means that the disciples are now functioning as missionaries, taking the gospel given them by Jesus to the people of Israel.¹ Along with Jesus, they have returned to their base of operations in Capernaum, only to discover that things are every bit as chaotic as before. Large numbers of people are waiting for Jesus to return.

This on-going chaos is described in verses 31-32. "*Then, because so many people were coming and going that they did not even have a chance to eat, [Jesus] said to them, 'Come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest.'* So they went away by themselves in a boat to a solitary place." The scene is a chaotic one in which people have waited in the Capernaum area for Jesus and his disciples to return. You can just imagine the people clamoring to get to Jesus when they saw him enter the town or else as they learned from others that Jesus was back. As we have seen before, things were so crazy that Jesus and his disciples could not even sit down for all meal. People were at them every minute, pleading with Jesus to help them, probably filling up Peter's house, making eating and resting impossible.

Jesus now calls his disciples to leave Capernaum and return to the wilderness. While Mark's narrative seems to imply that the immediate reason for leaving Capernaum is so that Jesus and his disciples can get away from the crowds so as to rest, we must not lose sight of the fact that Jesus' call to go out into the wilderness is also an important part of the transitional phase of his messianic mission. When Jesus and his disciples get into a boat and head away from Capernaum, Mark evokes the Old Testament and messianic expectation that God will provide rest for his people in the wilderness. The wilderness is also the place where Jesus defeated Satan as well as that place to get away from the crowds so as to pray and commune with God.

Throughout the Old Testament we read that God provides rest for his people in the wilderness. Both Isaiah and Jeremiah had prophesied that Israel's rest in the wilderness during the Exodus was a type of a final rest for the people of God in the messianic age (Isaiah 63:14; Jeremiah 31:2). So, when Jesus calls his disciples to go out to a solitary place, it is not only because they need rest from their labors (Jesus and the twelve are clearly tired), but it is at the same time a call for a New Exodus to begin. The whole scene is loaded with messianic symbolism.² So, while Jesus and his disciples must leave Capernaum to get some rest, they are not leaving just to be leaving. The time has come for Jesus to call true Israel into the

¹ Lane, The Gospel According to Mark, 224.

² Lane, The Gospel According to Mark, 225.

wilderness. Jesus will demonstrate to everyone present that the messianic age has dawned, because God will provide a messianic feast for his people in the wilderness.³

But as Jesus and his disciples get in the boat and sail away, it immediately becomes clear that they will not be alone. In verse 33, Mark recounts how *“many who saw them leaving recognized them and ran on foot from all the towns and got there ahead of them.”* We don’t know how long Jesus and his disciples spent in the hill country near Nazareth, but it is clear that while they were away, neither the crowds nor their enthusiasm for Jesus had diminished. Furthermore, we must not miss out on the subtle fact that Mark reports how the crowds recognized not just Jesus, but his disciples as well. The crowd saw *“them.”* The crowds ran on ahead of *“them.”* Now that Jesus had commissioned his disciples to preach, it was time for his messianic mission to enter a new phase in which the disciples will play an increasingly prominent role. That calling Israel into the wilderness was Jesus’ true intention all along becomes clear in what follows.⁴ *“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.”*

There are loud echoes from the Old Testament here, specifically from Numbers 27:15-17 and Ezekiel 34:5. In Numbers 27, we read *“Moses said to the LORD, ‘May the LORD, the God of the spirits of all mankind, appoint a man over this community to go out and come in before them, one who will lead them out and bring them in, so the LORD’s people will not be like sheep without a shepherd.’”* In Ezekiel 34:1-5, the prophet declares *“The word of the LORD came to me: ‘Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel; prophesy and say to them: ‘This is what the Sovereign LORD says: Woe to the shepherds of Israel who only take care of themselves! Should not shepherds take care of the flock? You eat the curds, clothe yourselves with the wool and slaughter the choice animals, but you do not take care of the flock. You have not strengthened the weak or healed the sick or bound up the injured. You have not brought back the strays or searched for the lost. You have ruled them harshly and brutally. So they were scattered because there was no shepherd, and when they were scattered they became food for all the wild animals.’”*

The scene in one in which Israel’s religious leaders are either absent—hence the people are without a shepherd—or else the religious leaders were far more interested in their own power and prestige than in caring for God’s flock. Jesus clearly sees this. This is why he has called the people into the wilderness. He is the good shepherd and given the fact that his disciples are representatives of the true Israel, this recalls to mind the arrangement of the people of Israel in the wilderness according to the twelve tribes. The imagery is powerful and inescapable, especially to those steeped in the Old Testament. Jesus is Israel’s faithful Messiah who will care for the people of God just as Israel’s own prophets had predicted. God will provide rest for his people in the wilderness, just as he as promised. And this glorious messianic scene will center in a fellowship meal, as the Son of God provides for his people.⁵

Mark is careful to tie what follows (the miraculous feeding of the five thousand) to the prior commissioning of the disciples and Jesus’ call for the people to go out into the wilderness. We need to notice that the disciples are directly involved in the miracle that follows and Mark will refer back to this

³ Watts, *Isaiah’s New Exodus in Mark*, 178-179.

⁴ Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 225.

⁵ Lane, *The Gospel According to Jesus*, 226.

event on several occasions (Mark 6:52; 8:17-21). There is also a sequel to this miraculous feeding of sorts in Mark 8:1-10, where Jesus feeds four thousand people. It is also not accidental that Mark places this event immediately after recounting Herod's drunken birthday bash which led to the death of John the Baptist. Herod claims royalty but is really nothing but a pretender. Jesus, however, is Israel's true king. Herod is surrounded by big-wigs, while Jesus is with those who are poor and needy. Herod's birthday bash is a picture of luxury and excess, while Jesus provides the people with the mere necessities of life. Therefore, whole scene in the wilderness is designed to contrast God's glory—which can only be seen through the eyes of faith—and the apparent glory of an earthly king such as Herod. But this is the very thing faith discerns, but unbelief cannot see.⁶ While the multitudes are not quite sure who Jesus was, they knew that he was sent from God. While Herod knew that John the Baptist had God's blessing, he still put John to death because he feared his wife more than God. Jesus does his father's will, while Herod acted purely according to self-interest. This is why Jesus brings the people into the wilderness—Israel's shepherd and true king has come.

Recall that Jesus had compassion on the multitudes who followed him out into the wilderness, since these people were truly sheep without a shepherd. Jesus spent his time teaching them about the kingdom of God, no doubt. But the disciples soon realized that an impending disaster was at hand and they plead with Jesus to stop teaching.

It was now late in the day and the multitudes who had followed Jesus were now some miles away from civilization. There were no grocery stores, gas stations, or fast food restaurants anywhere to be found. As we read in verse 37, *“by this time it was late in the day, so his disciples came to him. ‘This is a remote place,’ they said, ‘and it’s already very late.’ Send the people away so they can go to the surrounding countryside and villages and buy themselves something to eat.”* This was not a mere matter of convenience. Jesus and the disciples had led this huge crowd out into the wilderness and so the disciples may have felt responsible for taking care of them all. They did not understand yet why it was that Jesus had summoned the people far away from the towns. Seeing that it was getting late and that it would take the people some time to reach the nearby villages, the disciples implore Jesus to stop teaching so that the group could break up and head for food and shelter.

The disciples must have been shocked by what followed. In verse 37, are told *“But [Jesus] answered, ‘You give them something to eat.’”* These words simply made no sense to them. *“They said to [Jesus], ‘That would take eight months of a man’s wages! Are we to go and spend that much on bread and give it to them to eat?’”* In the first place, there's no doubt that the disciples didn't have anywhere near enough money to buy bread for five thousand people. The whole crowd together didn't have that much money. But Jesus was not going to let the matter go—this was an important moment. And so we read in verse 38 that he then asked the disciples, *“How many loaves do you have?” he asked. ‘Go and see.’ When they found out, they said, ‘Five—and two fish.’”* Five small barley loaves and two fish were not enough to feed Jesus and the twelve disciples, let alone five thousand people. There is clear a loud echo here from Numbers 11:13, 22, when Moses asked, *“Where can I get meat for all these people? They keep wailing to me, ‘Give us meat to eat!’ . . . Would they have enough if flocks and herds were slaughtered for them? Would they have enough if all the fish in the sea were caught for them?”*

What seems to set this miracle then apart from the others Mark has just covered is that Jesus called the people into the wilderness, knowing that there would not be enough food. He also specifically assigns to

⁶ France, *The Gospel of Mark*, 260; Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 228.

the disciples the responsibility of feeding the people.⁷ Jesus is clearly making a point. While the twelve do not yet see nor understand the significance of this—and their attitude of incredulity reveals that they are still struggling with Jesus’ identity—they will soon learn why Jesus has brought these things to pass.

Jesus is clearly in control of the situation. As we read in verses 39-40, “*Then Jesus directed them to have all the people sit down in groups on the green grass. So they sat down in groups of hundreds and fifties.*” The imagery of green grass has troubled many—how could there be green grass in the wilderness? Well, the fact that Mark mentions that the grass was green certainly indicates that his source for this information was present when this miracle occurred—probably Peter. For one thing, the wilderness area is not necessarily a desert area. It could have been Spring when the hills were green from rain. Jesus could have led them to an area naturally irrigated by springs, as there is no mention here of a shortage of water. But what is most significant about the green grass is its redemptive-historical symbolism.

God’s people will find rest in the wilderness, and the green grass implies that God’s glory can transform the arid places. This was a theme throughout the prophets, especially in Ezekiel 34:26-29. It is also the image invoked by the famous “shepherd Psalm,” Psalm 23. It is the Lord who causes his weary people to recline in green pastures. The whole scene cries out, “new Exodus,” especially when read in the backdrop of Exodus 16, our Old Testament lesson. God was about to provide his people with food in the desert. The scene is not only loaded with images from the wilderness journey, it is also messianic. That which the prophets had foretold was even then coming to pass. God would feed his people in the wilderness and join in a fellowship meal with them.⁸ Furthermore, they will lie down in green pastures.

When Jesus divides the people into groups of hundreds and fifties, this recalls the way in which Moses arranged the Israelites while they were camped in the wilderness. Some of the Jewish groups of the time, such as the Essenes, believed that the true Israel would assemble in the desert right before the time of the end. While the Essenes were wrong to associate this with the time of the end, they were right to tie this to the dawn of the messianic age.⁹ In any case, Mark’s point should now be clear. Jesus has come as Israel’s Messiah. The sheep (God’s people) are without a shepherd—until now. By calling the people of Israel out into the wilderness where he will provide them with green pastures and heavenly food, he will transform this leaderless multitude into a New Israel. This is why Jesus led the disciples away from Capernaum. This was the kind of rest Jesus was seeking.

Blessing the non-existent food, which was soon to be very existent, we read in verse 41, “*taking the five loaves and the two fish and looking up to heaven, he gave thanks and broke the loaves. Then he gave them to his disciples to set before the people. He also divided the two fish among them all.*” This is no ordinary meal, as Jesus looked toward heaven in reliance upon the power and blessing of God to provide for the needs of this New Israel gathered together in the wilderness. The food was consecrated in the power of the kingdom, with no attention given by Mark to just how it was, exactly, that enough fish and bread miraculously appeared that five-thousand people were fed with plenty left over. The point is that this was clearly a miracle and not some sort of trickery on the part of the disciples.

⁷ Lane, The Gospel According to Mark, 228.

⁸ See the helpful discussion of this in; Lane, The Gospel According to Mark, 229.

⁹ Cranfield, The Gospel According to Mark, 222; Lane, The Gospel According to Mark, 229.

Mark simply recounts that *“they all ate and were satisfied, and the disciples picked up twelve basketfuls of broken pieces of bread and fish. The number of the men who had eaten was five thousand.”* God had feed Israel in the wilderness as recounted in Exodus 16. God had provided meat and manna for his people. God made provision in the wilderness for his servants Elijah and Elisha. And now, God provides the New Israel with their daily bread in green pastures in the middle of the wilderness. Over five-thousand men had eaten—that number probably does not include the woman and children who may have been present. There was so much food that the people were well satisfied. They had eaten until they were full. And there was still twelve basketfuls of food leftover. This is truly a significant turning point in the ministry of Jesus. It is yet one more importance piece of information in revealing Jesus’ true identity, which is the question with which everyone in Israel, it seems, was struggling.

What then can we say be way of application?

Clearly, we have come to a turning point in the ministry of Jesus. Jesus is now expanding his ministry beyond the Galilee into new areas. Consider that the villages of Capernaum and Bethsaida had populations of no more than 2000 people. Out in the wilderness Jesus feeds at least 5000, which gives us a sense of how popular Jesus had become. This explains why word of Jesus’ popularity would get back to Herod and why Herod would be so concerned. This is a large number of people and Jesus’ influence is clearly growing. While the messianic significance of this is readily apparent to those who read this with the eyes of faith, it is also an indication of Jesus’ increasing popularity and therefore, and his increasing threat to the apostate religious leadership of Israel.

The sad fact is that the people are without a shepherd and so Jesus has compassion on them. Not only is this event loaded with messianic significance—Israel’s Messiah feeding the true Israel out in the wilderness—but in miracle this we see Jesus’ response to the physical hunger on the part of the people.¹⁰ Jesus is the very antithesis of someone like Herod who places self-interest above all else, but Jesus is also the very antithesis of the false shepherds of Israel who care much more about feeding themselves than the people of God. Where are the scribes and Pharisees and members of the Sanhedrin, when Israel’s Messiah feeds his people out in the wilderness? Where are the shepherds of Israel when the Messiah summons the people into the desert? Jesus sees that the people are in need and so he feeds them. In this too we learn something about the person of Jesus. He is not only Israel’s Messiah, he is also Israel’s servant, ministering to the needs of the New Israel he is even then creating.

When Jesus calls the people out into the wilderness he is tying together the two themes of a New Exodus and a messianic feast. This event is really a vivid picture of God’s presence with his people in the form of a covenant mediator who is not only mediator of the covenant, but who is simultaneously Israel’s Messiah. It is no wonder, the people are having trouble figuring out who Jesus is. Before his death and resurrection, the people would have great trouble in understanding how one person could fulfill so many different and diverse prophecies. All of these prophetic and messianic themes—which otherwise do not seem to be connected—now find fulfillment in one person. Slowly but surely the veil is being lifted and Jesus is answering that question people were asking throughout all Israel. Who is Jesus? He is the mediator of the covenant. He’s the New Moses forming a new Israel and providing his people with food and green pastures in the middle of the wilderness. He is also Israel’s Messiah who will join his people for a glorious messianic feast in the wilderness. He is the Son of God who demonstrates his absolute authority over nature, the demonic and death itself. And people were struggling to make sense of this.

¹⁰ Cranfield, The Gospel According to Mark, 221.

This feeding of the five thousand is not sacramental—it is messianic. But the feeding of the five thousand does foreshadow the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper which had not yet been instituted. Just as the multitudes enjoyed table fellowship with Jesus in the wilderness—reclining in green pastures and eating heavenly bread of sorts—so too, we as God’s people enjoy table fellowship with Jesus in the Lord’s Supper. Each Lord’s day, we enjoy a symbolic feast in the wilderness of this present evil age, as Jesus gives us the living bread from heaven. We all eat and are satisfied on the feast of word and sacrament. Just as in the feeding of the five thousand people, Jesus points ahead to the ultimate messianic banquet which finds fruition in the Marriage Supper of the Lamb, so too, Jesus may also be prefiguring himself as the bread from heaven, as is recounted in John 6.¹¹ And so while there is nothing sacramental in the feeding of the multitude, it does point us to Jesus who is living bread from heaven, and who still gives us his body and blood in the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper.

In all of this, it is clear that Jesus is the good shepherd. He makes his people lie down in green pastures. He loves his people and he cares for them. He did then, he does now. He gives us both our daily and our heavenly bread. Indeed, it could be said of the five thousand, “they all ate and were satisfied.” And it can be said of us when we assemble on the Lord’s Day, we eat, and we are satisfied. Amen!

¹¹ See Cranfield’s helpful discussion of this in; [The Gospel According to Mark](#), 221-223.