

LESSON EIGHT

BREAD OF LIFE

They all ate and were satisfied, and the disciples picked up twelve basketfuls of broken pieces that were left over.

MATTHEW 14:20



REFLECTION

Food is such a dominant part of daily life. When it's missing, we notice! Think about a time when you've gone without food, either by choice or by necessity. What was the experience like of being hungry and then being able to eat again?

SITUATION

The day starts with some tragic news. John the Baptist has just been executed by Herod Antipas, the reigning monarch. When Jesus hears the news, he retreats to a solitary place to be alone. Against this backdrop, Matthew describes how Jesus then revealed the depth of his power and compassion. The Carpenter King feeds a crowd of 5,000 men (plus women and children) with five loaves and two fish. In the process, he teaches his disciples an important lesson on faith and caring for those in need.

OBSERVATION

Read Matthew 14:6-21 from the New International Version or the New King James Version.

NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION

⁶ On Herod's birthday the daughter of Herodias danced for the guests and pleased Herod so much ⁷ that he promised with an oath to give her whatever she asked. ⁸ Prompted by her mother, she said, "Give me here on a platter the head of John the Baptist." ⁹ The king was distressed, but because of his oaths and his dinner guests, he ordered that her re-

quest be granted ¹⁰ and had John beheaded in the prison. ¹¹ His head was brought in on a platter and given to the girl, who carried it to her mother. ¹² John's disciples came and took his body and buried it. Then they went and told Jesus.

¹³ When Jesus heard what had happened, he withdrew by boat privately to a solitary place. Hearing of this, the crowds followed him on foot from the towns. ¹⁴ When Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, he had compassion on them and healed their sick.

¹⁵ As evening approached, the disciples came to him and said, "This is a remote place, and it's already getting late. Send the crowds away, so they can go to the villages and buy themselves some food."

¹⁶ Jesus replied, "They do not need to go away. You give them something to eat."

¹⁷ "We have here only five loaves of bread and two fish," they answered.

¹⁸ "Bring them here to me," he said. ¹⁹ And he directed the people to sit down on the grass. 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 the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the people. ²⁰ They all ate and were satisfied, and the disciples picked up twelve basketfuls of broken pieces that were left over. ²¹ The number of those who ate was about five thousand men, besides women and children.

NEW KING JAMES VERSION

⁶ But when Herod's birthday was celebrated, the daughter of Herodias danced before them and pleased Herod. ⁷ Therefore he promised with an oath to give her whatever she might ask.

⁸ So she, having been prompted by her mother, said, "Give me John the Baptist's head here on a platter."

⁹ And the king was sorry; nevertheless, because of the oaths and because of those who sat with him, he commanded it to be given to her. ¹⁰ So he sent and had John beheaded in prison. ¹¹ And his head was brought on a platter and given to the girl, and she brought it to her mother. ¹² Then his disciples came and took away the body and buried it, and went and told Jesus.

¹³ When Jesus heard it, He departed from there by boat to a deserted place by Himself. But when the multitudes heard it, they followed Him on foot from the cities. ¹⁴ And when Jesus went out He saw a great multitude; and He was moved with compassion for them, and healed their sick. ¹⁵ When it was evening, His disciples came to Him, saying, "This is a deserted place, and the hour is already late. Send the multitudes away, that they may go into the villages and buy themselves food."

¹⁶ But Jesus said to them, "They do not need to go away. You give them something to eat."

¹⁷ And they said to Him, "We have here only five loaves and two fish."

¹⁸ He said, "Bring them here to Me." ¹⁹ Then He commanded the multitudes to sit down on the grass. And He took the five loaves and the two fish, and looking up to heaven, He blessed and broke and gave the loaves to the disciples; and the disciples gave to the multitudes. ²⁰ So they all ate and were filled, and they took up twelve baskets full of the fragments that remained. ²¹ Now those who had eaten were about five thousand men, besides women and children.

EXPLORATION

1. Herod Antipas had ordered John the Baptist to be imprisoned because he had said it was not lawful for him to be married to his brother's wife (see Matthew 14:1-5). What events led to Herod reluctantly agreeing to have John executed?

2. Why did Herod feel he had to honor his daughter's request?

3. What was Jesus' response to the report of John's death?

4. How did the masses react when they learned Jesus had left by boat?

5. What was the disciples' attitude and recommendation when the day had ended and the crowds were still there?

6. How did Jesus ultimately deal with all those hungry people who had followed him to a remote location?

INSPIRATION

The feeding of the five thousand . . . answers the question, *What does God do when his children are weak?* If God ever needed an excuse to give up on people, he has one here. Surely God is going to banish these followers until they learn to believe.

Is that what he does? You decide. "Jesus then took the loaves, gave thanks, and distributed to those who were seated as much as they wanted. He did the same with the fish" (John 6:11).

When the disciples didn't pray, Jesus prayed. When the disciples didn't see God, Jesus sought God. When the disciples were weak, Jesus was strong. When the disciples had no faith, Jesus had faith. He thanked God.

For what? The crowds? The pandemonium? The weariness? The faithless disciples? No, he thanked God for the basket of bread. He ignored the clouds and found the ray and thanked God for it.

Look what he does next. "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 the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the people" (Matthew 14:19).

Rather than punish the disciples, he employs them. There they go, passing out the bread they didn't request, enjoying the answer to the prayer they didn't even pray. If Jesus would have acted according to the faith of his disciples, the multitudes would have gone unfed. But he didn't, and he doesn't. God is true to us even when we forget him.

God's blessings are dispensed according to the riches of his grace, not according to the depth of our faith. "If we are faithless, he remains faithful, for he cannot disown himself" (2 Timothy 2:13).

Why is that important to know? So you won't get cynical. Look around you. Aren't there more mouths than bread? Aren't there more wounds than physicians? Aren't there more who need the truth than those who tell it? Aren't there more churches asleep than churches afire?

So what do we do? Throw up our hands and walk away? Tell the world we can't help them? That's what the disciples wanted to do. Should we just give up . . . ? No, we don't give up. We look up. We trust. We believe. And our optimism is not hollow. Christ has proven worthy. He has shown that he never fails, though there is nothing but failure in us.

God is faithful even when his children are not. (From *A Gentle Thunder* by Max Lucado.)

REACTION

7. John the Baptist and Jesus were both cousins and colleagues. What emotions do you think Jesus must have been feeling when he heard about John's brutal execution?

8. How does Jesus' response in this situation epitomize the concept of compassionate and selfless servanthood?

9. How and where do you find the capacity to give, serve, and be centered on others when you are battling your own trials and tragedies?

10. Summarize the overall reaction of the disciples to this series of incidents. In what ways can you relate to their attitudes and actions?

11. There is a tension in this passage between Christ's desire to commune with his Father and the needs of the people around him. How do we balance these competing needs—our own souls for rest and replenishment and the endless demands (many legitimate) of others?

12. Matthew notes in verse 19 that Jesus directed the people to sit on the grass. Mark 6:39 adds the little detail that it was "green" grass. What does this often overlooked fact remind us about the one known as the Good Shepherd (see Psalm 23)?

LIFE LESSONS

Life is messy and hard. People are needy and demanding. We are called to lives of sacrifice and service. How do we pull it off? Like the disciples of old, we follow the One with all the power and compassion. We look to him. We listen to him. We do whatever he tells us. Ultimately, we trust him to work through us. Such a life is scary and uncertain. We will be tested and pulled. But in the end, our faith will grow and the needs of others will be met. The one fact we must cling to is that Jesus is the bread of God who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world (see John 6:33).

DEVOTION

Lord Jesus, you are the Bread of Life who gives life to the world. Give me the good sense to come to you daily and draw my strength from you. You are the Good Shepherd. Grant me the courage to follow your example so that I might serve others and lead them to you.

JOURNALING

Someone wisely said, "You cannot impart what you do not possess." What do you need to do to become a more effective servant to others and a more compelling witness to God's goodness?

FOR FURTHER READING

To complete the book of Matthew during this twelve-part study, read Matthew 13:53-17:27. For more Bible passages on spiritual food, read Exodus 16:1-35; Isaiah 25; John 4:31-34; 6:27; and Hebrews 5:12-14.