
Power and Agenda

John 6:1-21

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Desolate places...

Sudan, Northern Kenya and Uganda

Hunger...

North Korea, Sudan

Bread...

Basic sustenance, food, water, rice

Who will provide?

UN asking countries to send food to help alleviate the starving. Should we?

Christians are often the first to move to help alleviate suffering. This social concern for humanity seems to be highlighted more and more. Maybe a text like this will help us think through the issues that hover around need, want, supply, power and public agendas.

Now this text today does not stand by itself. It opens with the words, "After this...". Ok, so, what is this after? Well it follows the teachings and confrontations of John 5. Verse 45–47 end with Jesus saying the following words:

⁴⁵ Do not think that I will accuse you to the Father. There is one who accuses you: Moses, on whom you have set your hope. ⁴⁶ For if you believed Moses, you would believe me; for he wrote of me. ⁴⁷ But if you do not believe his writings, how will you believe my words?"

Well, either there is no connection – it is just the next story or there is something here that connects to Moses, to unbelief and to Jesus who is to be believed and trusted. Let's see.

So Many Needs

(v. 1-9)

Matthew shows us so many needs.

¹ After this Jesus went away to the other side of the Sea of Galilee, which is the Sea of Tiberias. ² And a large crowd was following him, because they saw the signs that he was doing on the sick. ³ Jesus went up on the mountain, and there he sat down with his disciples. ⁴ Now the Passover, the feast of the Jews, was at hand. ⁵ Lifting up his eyes, then, and seeing that a large crowd was coming toward him, Jesus said to Philip, "Where are we to buy bread, so that these people may eat?" ⁶ He said this to test him, for he himself knew what he would do. ⁷ Philip answered him, "Two hundred denarii would not buy enough bread for each of them to get a little." ⁸ One of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, said to him, ⁹ "There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish, but what are they for so many?"

The Need of the Disciples

(v. 1-3)

Jesus leaves the press of the people. He crosses over the sea of Galilee. Then he takes his disciples up into the hill country around the sea. Jesus and the disciples are seeking some refuge and rest from the crowds that followed Him everywhere. The push and pull, the constant teaching, the pressure exerted by His opponents all were wearying and wearing. Jesus and the disciples are needing rest.

The Need of the People

(v. 4-5)

The people also have many needs. They were coming out from everywhere. Even on this side of the sea in the hill country, His fame has gone before Him. They were following Jesus seeking to be near Him. They were hoping for healing. They were seeing miracles done before their very eyes. So this crowd is filled with the lame, the sick, the weak, the blind, the deaf. There may have been lepers around the fringe. But, this is a needy lot.

And now, it is late in the day and they have had nothing to eat. So many needy people – and now so many hungry people.

The Need of Philip

(v. 5-7)

I love this scene. Jesus turns to watch the crowd toiling up the hillside. Phillip is standing by his side. The sun is lowering in the western sky. While it is not a desert it is still a long way out of town. Jesus turns to Philip and asks, "Where are we going to buy bread to feed all these people?"

Wish I could've seen the look on Philip's face. Where doesn't even begin to address the problem. He is looking out over enough people that it would have taken 200 denarii just to feed them a small bite. This is equivalent to 200 days wages for an ordinary day laborer. They are a poor band of followers of a former carpenter turned traveling teacher. Phillip needs money.

But Matthew points that Jesus knew what He was going to do. Jesus asked Phillip this in order to test him. What is it that Jesus is testing? Could He be testing Phillip's faith? Will he see beyond the immediate problem and see Jesus who provided bread in the wilderness under Moses' leadership? Or will he walk by sight, by what he sees – or really, by what he doesn't see – money?

The Need of Andrew

(v. 8-9)

Simon Peter's brother speaks up with a possibility. There's a boy here who has a lunch with him. Now don't think of a western "loaf" of bread here – think 5 pita breads and 2 small smoked fish. But this is a pitiful amount in the face of the overwhelming need of the people. All this is going to do is start a fight. In fact, it wouldn't even really feed thirteen hungry full grown men. It is, after all, a little boy's lunch.

But you notice something right in the middle of this text? Did you hear a holiday on the calendar? "Now the Passover was at hand." OK, so, late spring in Judea. Is this all? Or are we seeing another sign post to something greater than the human need for earthly bread? Could there be spiritual need?

Such Great Provision

(v. 10-14)

In the face of overwhelming need, there is such great provision.

¹⁰ Jesus said, "Have the people sit down." Now there was much grass in the place. So the men sat down, about five thousand in number. ¹¹ Jesus then took the loaves, and when he had given thanks, he distributed them to those who were seated. So also the fish, as much as they wanted. ¹² And when they had eaten their fill, he told his disciples, "Gather up the leftover fragments, that nothing may be lost." ¹³ So they gathered them up and filled twelve baskets with fragments from the five barley loaves left by those who had eaten.

What an amazing miracle. How does this unfold?

Orderly Preparation

(v. 10)

Jesus issues a command. It is a simple one. We need to have all these people sit down. So, the disciples obey the command. They do so in such a way that they know that there are about five thousand men⁷. From the other accounts of this event, we know that there were women and children present. But it does not suit John's purpose to record that. So the crowd is settled on the grassy hillside, counted and ready for...

Thankful Blessing

(v. 11)

Jesus takes the loaves and fishes from the little boy whom Andrew has brought forward. He lifts them up and offers a prayer of thanksgiving in which He blesses God. What a picture – surrounded by need the Son of God lifts food to heaven and gives thanks to His heavenly Father. God grateful for God's grace.

Lavish Supply

(v. 11-12)

From 5 loaves and 2 fish comes a lavish supply. Jesus breaks the bread and keeps on breaking it. He divides the fish and keeps on dividing it. Come back for seconds. Come back for thirds. Who wants more? Now look. We are talking about 5,000 men. Again we know from other accounts that there are upwards of 20,000 people. Just imagine serving that. They come back to Jesus and keep coming. More and more and is available. Plate after plate; dish after dish goes to hungry people.

Overflowing Abundance**(v. 13)**

So the crowd is fed and full. Now, Jesus sends the disciples around with baskets to gather up what was left over. Twelve large (don't think our offering baskets; think baskets that would be strapped on your back to carry wheat. In fact, these were probably used to serve the meal as well. Twelve baskets for twelve disciples.

So what is the point? Well, let's start with what this *not* about.

It is *not* about Jesus taking care of the needy. This is not a social or mercy ministry text. If we do that then we are misunderstanding the Bible and misusing John.

It is *not* about Jesus being concerned about the ecology. He is not merely picking up the trash so as not to litter this lovely grass hillside with remnants of a large crowd. If we do that we are bringing our agenda into the text.

It is *not* about Jesus will meet all your needs because He has compassion on you. He sees that you are following Him and that you have great needs and so He will take care of you. If we do that then we are coming to Jesus for what we can get out of Him.

All of these ways of handling this miracle subvert the gospel.

How can I say that? Aren't these conclusions obvious from the text? Only if you are not reading the context. Remember how I started? What was everyone's great need from the end of the last chapter of John? It is that they believe. It is not just that they believe – they have to believe the Scriptures.

Such Tragic Misunderstanding**(v. 14-21)**

We are in good company for what John shows us next are series of tragic misunderstandings. He is showing us some ways in which people bring their own agendas to Jesus. He shows us how failing to believe the Scriptures messes us up. Listen to what immediately follows.

Of Jesus' Mission**(v. 14-15)**

¹⁴ When the people saw the sign that he had done, they said, "This is indeed the Prophet who is to come into the world!"¹⁵ Perceiving then that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, Jesus withdrew again to the mountain by himself.

It is possible to misunderstand Jesus' mission. The people see a prophet who ought to be king. This is the kind of king they want. This is the kind of king they are used to. So let's make Him king. Let's take these 5,000 men and form a militia. We'll have twelve leaders to organize it. We'll make Jesus king. And we will never have to worry about bread or food again. We will have no problem getting everyone to follow Him.

So how does Jesus respond to this? He slips away and hides from them. This is not His agenda. He has come as the King. But this is not how His kingdom comes. His kingdom does not come by military force nor by human sword. It comes and conquers sinful men by the Word of God being believed in hearts that have come to life by the Spirit. Jesus is king where His Word is believed.

Of Jesus' Absence

(v. 16-18)

¹⁶ When evening came, his disciples went down to the sea, ¹⁷ got into a boat, and started across the sea to Capernaum. It was now dark, and Jesus had not yet come to them.

It is possible to misunderstand Jesus' absence. After all this milling around talking about and organizing what was going to be a rebellion, they wake up to realize that Jesus has disappeared. He is not there. The disciples sort of hang around until evening comes waiting for Him to come back. They don't understand why He has gone. And they watch as this opportunity for a power grab just fades away as the crowds dwindle away heading for home. They are sort of left on the wrong side of the sea without the leader who won't be king.

So, they get in a boat and *leave Jesus*. Now I don't want to get too imaginative here but what kind of discussion would have gone on that would have led to this decision. "Hey, listen guys. We don't know where he went. He sure left us holding the bag, never mind the baskets. We have got to get going or we are going to be stuck here. So, let's go on – He can fend for Himself."

And now the first ominous turn. It is dark. Now we who live in a lighted world can hardly appreciate how dark darkness can be. On a lake, after an exhilarating turned sour day and Jesus gone. Bummer...

Of Jesus' Power

(v. 19-21)

¹⁸ The sea became rough because a strong wind was blowing. ¹⁹ When they had rowed about three or four miles, they saw Jesus walking on the sea and coming near the boat, and they were frightened. ²⁰ But he said to them, "It is I; do not be afraid." ²¹ Then they were glad to take him into the boat, and immediately the boat was at the land to which they were going.

It is possible to misunderstand Jesus' power. Here the disciples are now, rowing hard against the rising wind and waves. They have rowed for three to four miles on a mile and half wide sea. Working hard; getting nowhere.

And Jesus comes to them walking on the water. Dark. Winds. Waves. Amazing miracle. Great potential. Disappeared. Opportunity lost. Bummed out. Confusion. Toiling. Anxious. Fear. And a luminous apparition hovering over the water. What? Who? Frightened.

Jesus identifies Himself and calms their fears. His power is not to serve their agenda or their aims. Yes, He is the king. But He will not come into His kingdom through human power, strategy or cleverness. His rule, His power comes when He is believed. Here, belief welcomes Him into the boat. They are immediately safe.

Reflect and Respond

Are you willing to simply believe the Scriptures? Do you hang back from trust till you see Him proven? You want a sign? You want Him to move in your inwardly? The Scriptures are God's voice. Listen, believe, repent and be saved.

Think about your response to Jesus. Do you need Jesus PLUS... What do you want from him? What do you expect to receive if you believe? What is in it for you? Are you believing in Jesus because He will solve life's problems for you? Is salvation about your agenda? Is it even really all about you?

What are you doing to bring about the kingdom? Are you looking for a crowd, power, agenda, position, place, lead – is that what brings the kingdom? Will bread for the masses expand the kingdom? No, the kingdom goes where the gospel is given out through broken people to a sinful world to whom God grants life. The kingdom is where people believe.

At the heart of God's power and God's agenda is the Passover. No, not the old Jewish celebration, but rather the Jesus reality. He is the sacrificed lamb to redeem. He is the sovereign Lord to rule. Believe and bow to Him today.

⁷ The other gospels tell us that they were organized into ranks of 50, 100 and 150. Those accounts are emphasizing the ordering of the men into the familiar military ranks. However, *this* text does not say so. I have chosen *not* to cross-seed this text with the others. John is using this text to serve a slightly different purpose largely focused on the disciples.