



The Investigator's Gospel

An Eyewitness Journey Through Luke

Session 10 – Chapter 9 – Jesus and the Poor

The Feeding of the 5000 (Luke 9:10-17) – also known (more accurately) as the Feeding of the Multitude – is the only miracle (save the Resurrection itself) told in all four Gospels (Matthew 14, Mark 6, Luke 9, John 6), indicating its importance. Additionally, there is a further parallel account in Matthew (15) and Mark (8) known as the Feeding of the 4000.

Luke's placement of the Feeding of the Multitude in the collection of miracles after John the Baptist's question (*"Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?"*) with the question repeated immediately prior to the Feeding by, of all people, Herod the Tetrach (*Luke 9:9 - "I beheaded John. Who, then, is this I hear such things about?"*) and the Confession of Peter and the Transfiguration, indicates that for Luke, this is a revelation of Jesus' divinity and Messianic role.

Important to the background of this miracle are these Old Testament events:

1) the miraculous feeding of the people of Israel with manna in the desert;

Exodus 16:2-8 - *In the desert the whole community grumbled against Moses and Aaron. The Israelites said to them, "If only we had died by the Lord's hand in Egypt! There we sat around pots of meat and ate all the food we wanted, but you have brought us out into this desert to starve this entire assembly to death."* Then the Lord said to Moses, *"I will rain down bread from heaven for you. The people are to go out each day and gather enough for that day..."* So Moses and Aaron said to all the Israelites, *"In the evening you will know that it was the Lord who brought you out of Egypt, and in the morning you will see the glory of the Lord... You will know that it was the Lord when he gives you meat to eat in the evening and all the bread you want in the morning."*

2) Elisha's feeding of 100 men with loaves and grain (2 Kings 4:42-44)

A man came from Baal Shalishah, bringing the man of God twenty loaves of barley bread baked from the first ripe grain, along with some heads of new grain. "Give it to the people to eat," Elisha said. "How can I set this before a hundred men?" his servant asked. But Elisha answered, "Give it to the people to eat. For this is what the Lord says: 'They will eat and have some left over.'" Then he set it before them, and they ate and had some left over, according to the word of the Lord.

- 3) the **“Messianic Banquet,” God’s eschatological promise to feed and shepherd his people.** The messianic banquet is an important theme for Luke, which will recur again and again during his travel narrative.

Isaiah 25:6-8 - On this mountain the Lord Almighty will prepare a feast of rich food for all peoples, a banquet of aged wine—the best of meats and the finest of wines. On this mountain he will destroy the shroud that enfolds all peoples, the sheet that covers all nations; he will swallow up death forever. The Sovereign Lord will wipe away the tears from all faces; he will remove his people’s disgrace from all the earth. The Lord has spoken.

The miracle reveals Jesus’ identity (“*You will know that it was the Lord*”), his power over nature, and also his ability to care for and sustain his people. The extra food left over confirms the abundant nature of God’s blessings and sustenance.

Luke places the story in Bethsaida, home town of Peter, Andrew and Philip, just north of the inlet of the Jordan River as it flows into the Sea of Galilee. Jesus and the disciples were looking for some “alone time,” but the crowds heard of it and followed them. By afternoon, they had gathered in large numbers in what the disciples call “*a remote place.*” Such a large crowd (five thousand men!) could not be fed or housed in such a location, and the disciples, “*late in the afternoon,*” ask Jesus to send the crowd away.

Jesus tells the disciples to feed them – an impossible task, given their limited resources of five loaves and two fish. Then we read, “*Taking the five loaves and the two fish and looking up to heaven, he gave thanks and broke them. Then he gave them to the disciples to distribute to the people.*” The wording here is important. The King James translation has, “*Then he took the five loaves and the two fishes, and looking up to heaven, he blessed them.*” The actual wording in Greek is that Jesus “*eulogasen autos;*” literally, he “said the good word for them.” We would translate it, “he said grace.” In Hebrew, we would read, “he baruched,” meaning, “he said the prayer of blessing.” The Hebrew prayer of blessing for bread is, “Blessed (Baruch) are you, Lord our God, King of the Universe, who brings forth bread from the earth.”

All this to say, it is God who is blessed for the bread. The bread itself is not blessed. This is important for us to understand. Inanimate objects (such as bread) are not blessed. God is blessed as the giver; we are blessed as the recipients. The bread, as a material object, is not itself “blessed.”

Jesus distributes the food to the disciples, who then distribute it among the people. “*They all ate and were satisfied,*” with twelve basketsful of leftovers, gathered by the disciples – the abundance a reflection of the Elisha story. The number twelve is

significant; it reflects the totality of the nation of Israel (12 tribes), indicating that there is enough blessing to satisfy the entire nation.

Luke tells this story with considerable less detail than the other Gospels. Matthew adds that the number of the crowd was indeed 5000 men, *“plus women and children.”* Mark adds that Jesus had compassion on the crowd, *“for they were like sheep without a shepherd.”* Jesus is their shepherd, as God is the Shepherd of his people – re Psalm 23.

John adds considerably more. He mentions that this occurred *“when Passover was near,”* making a direct link with the Exodus story of Manna in the Desert. We are also told that Jesus’ challenge to the disciples to feed the crowd *“was to test them.”* The five loaves and two fish are provided by a little boy, found by Andrew. Rather than “eulogasen,” John uses the word “eucharistasas” – *“he gave thanks”* for the bread – clarifying any confusion caused from the wording in the other earlier Gospels. It is upon Jesus’ instructions that *“nothing be wasted”* that the leftovers are gathered. John also adds that as a result of the miracle, the people wanted to make Jesus king – an explicit reference to the Messianic banquet. But Jesus *“withdrew.”* The Kingship Jesus was to establish could not be bought by bread, but by sacrifice.

Most significantly, while Luke follows the Feeding with the declaration of Peter that Jesus is the Messiah, followed then by the Transfiguration, in John (chapter 6), the story is followed by Jesus declaring himself to be *“the Bread of Life,”* the *“living bread that came down from heaven.”*

John then compares the Feeding of the 5000 to the Eucharistic Celebration of Communion: *“For my flesh is real food and my blood is real drink. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me, and I in them.”* Not surprisingly, upon hearing this, *“many of his disciples said, ‘this is a hard teaching. Who can accept it?’”* John also adds. *“from this time, many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him.”* (John 6) Peter and the Twelve, however, remain faithful: *““Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and to know that you are the Holy One of God.”* This statement of Peter mirrors the Confession related in the other Gospels.

The Feeding of the Four Thousand (Matthew 15; Mark 8)

Once again, Jesus is confronted by a hungry crowd. Both Matthew and Mark relate this story after a series of events in Gentile country among non-Jews (Tyre, the Decapolis). Although he returns to the Sea of Galilee, it is apparently on the “other side,” the Gentile region of Philip the Tetrarch and the Decapolis. Following many healings, Matthew states, *“And they praised the God of Israel,”* again inferring that it is a non-Jewish audience.

Jesus says, in a detail absent from the Feeding of the 5000 (Mark 8:2-3): *“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.”* The remainder of the story proceeds along the line of the 5000 story, with the difference that they have *“seven loaves, and a few small fish.”* After all have eaten their fill, seven baskets of leftovers are gathered.

The number seven is not coincidental; it recalls the story of Creation. Here, it is not only the nation of Israel who receive the Bread of Life from the Messiah; it is all of creation, even those from *“a long distance.”* The blessing of the Messiah is for all people.

Jesus and the Poor

Generosity to the poor is a constant theme in the Old Testament, as well as in the New. The poor are frequently considered in the Gospels, most often in the context of receiving the “Good News” – that they will receive favour and blessing from God.

Throughout the Gospels, Jesus commands generosity. In Luke alone, we hear:

- *Luke 11:41 - be generous to the poor*
- *Luke 12:33 Sell your possessions and give to the poor.*
- *Luke 14:13 But when you give a banquet, invite the poor*
- *Luke 18:22 “You still lack one thing. Sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.”*
- *Luke 19:8 - Zacchaeus stood up and said to the Lord, “Look, Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor”*
- *Luke 21:3 - “Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all the others.*

Giving to the poor was a common practice for Jesus and the disciples. The Gospel of John (in addition to the others) tells of the following situations:

When Jesus was anointed by Lazarus’ sister Mary with expensive perfume, Judas objects. *“Why wasn’t this perfume sold and the money given to the poor? It was worth a year’s wages.”* However, John adds, *“He did not say this because he cared about the poor but because he was a thief; as keeper of the money bag, he used to help himself to what was put into it.”* John 12:5-6

Jesus then says the following, which seems, at first glance, to be in contrast to Jesus’ normally compassionate stance: *“You will always have the poor among you, but you will not always have me”* (John 12:8). However, Jesus is actually quoting from a passage in Deuteronomy, which talks about being generous to those in need (Deuteronomy 15:10-11): *Give generously to them and do so without a grudging heart;*

then because of this the Lord your God will bless you in all your work and in everything you put your hand to. There will always be poor people in the land. Therefore I command you to be openhanded toward your fellow Israelites who are poor and needy in your land. Obviously, in quoting this passage, Jesus is affirming the need for continuous generosity, while still affirming the “special case” of the anointing with perfume, which Jesus says, if for *“the day of my burial.”*

That giving to the poor was regular practice of Jesus and the disciples, is seen in John 13:29. Jesus has just told Judas to do *“what you are about to do,”* which is to betray Jesus. Judas leaves in a hurry. We read, *“Since Judas had charge of the money, some thought Jesus was telling him to buy what was needed for the festival, or to give something to the poor.”*

Most notable is the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats, which sets out the characteristics of the followers of Jesus (Matthew 25:34-36):

‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.’

The practice of the Early Church demonstrates how seriously this was taken.

Ministry to the Poor and Hungry in Acts and the New Testament Letters

Generosity was a primary characteristic of the Early Church. We read in Acts (4:32-37):

All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of their possessions was their own, but they shared everything they had... And God’s grace was so powerfully at work in them all that there were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned land or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales and put it at the apostles’ feet, and it was distributed to anyone who had need. Joseph... whom the apostles called Barnabas (which means “son of encouragement”), sold a field he owned and brought the money and put it at the apostles’ feet.

The ministry to the poor eventually took the form of daily distribution of food, and began to overtax the abilities of the Apostles to manage. They established an order of ministry to oversee outreach to the poor (Acts 6:1-7). As the church spread beyond Jerusalem, it was decided in Antioch to provide relief for the famine-struck churches in Judea (Acts 11:29-30 - *The disciples, as each one was able, decided to provide help for the brothers and sisters living in Judea. This they did, sending their gifts to the elders by Barnabas and Saul.*)

The letters of James and John:

James 2:15-17 - Suppose a brother or a sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to them, "Go in peace; keep warm and well fed," but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it? In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.

1 John 3:17 - If anyone has material possessions and sees a brother or sister in need but has no pity on them, how can the love of God be in that person?

The Apostle Paul and the Poor

Although Paul is remembered primarily as an evangelist and theologian, he also devoted a great deal of time and energy to organizing a collection to help relieve the economic hardship of the churches in Judea. Following the request of Peter and the leadership of the Jerusalem church that he "*continue to remember the poor*" (Gal. 2:10; cf. Acts 11:27–30), Paul began actively promoting this charitable contribution in his ministry throughout the Aegean basin.

The scope of this endeavor was truly significant. In the letters that have survived, Paul first explicitly mentions it in 1 Corinthians 16:1–4, though it is clear from this reference that the Corinthians have already been participating in the project, as were the churches in Galatia. In Romans 15:26 Paul confirms that the churches of Achaia are contributing, as well as those of Macedonia (cf. 2 Cor. 8:1–5). From 2 Corinthians 8:19–20 we learn that the apostle himself is going to accompany delegates from the churches to deliver the relief aid to Jerusalem.

While the primary purpose of this charitable gift is to relieve the poverty of the Jerusalem church, in 2 Corinthians 9:12–14 Paul indicates that more is involved than mere financial assistance: "*In their prayers [of thanksgiving] for you their hearts will go out to you because of the surpassing grace God has given you.*" Paul reasons that such a generous gift will cause the Jewish believers in Jerusalem to grow in their affection for the expanding Gentile church, promoting the unity of Jew and Gentile in Christ and, by implication, strengthening his Gentile mission.

"For if the willingness is there, the gift is acceptable according to what one has (2 Corinthians 8:12)." The sentiment expressed here was illustrated in the story of "the widow's mite" in Mark 12:41–44. On the Jewish side, Tobit 4:8 is relevant: "Measure your alms by what you have; if you have much, give more; if you have little, do not be afraid to give less in alms." Paul concludes (2 Cor 9:7) – "Each of you should give what you have decided in your heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver."