

WEEK 3: JESUS FEEDS THE FIVE THOUSAND

Mark 6:30–44



The Place of the Passage

Mark's Gospel situates Jesus' feeding of the five thousand within a series of well-known events in the life of Christ. The immediate details of chapter 6 place the miracle during a season of ministry in which Jesus is traveling between villages to teach (see Mark 6:6). Due to Jesus' rejection at his hometown of Nazareth the narrative shift marks a new season of ministry outside Galilee (see *ESV Study Bible* notes Mark 6:7–8:26 on page 1904). Chronologically this would place the miracle toward the end of Jesus' public ministry. It should also be noted that this is the only pre-resurrection miracle that appears in all four Gospels (cf. Matt. 14:13–21; Luke 9:12–17; John 6:1–15). Also connected to this miracle is the sending out of the twelve and their return (Mark 6:7–13, 30) and the death of John the Baptist (Mark 6:14–29). This miracle, along with the previous week's miracle (see Week 2: Jesus Turns Water into Wine), is a miracle of fertility (i.e., "provision") and therefore an old creation miracle, which means it is a sign with operations fitting the current world. In this miracle Jesus displays his compassion for people as he offers hospitality and provision to his disciples and the crowds.

The Big Picture

Jesus, the Shepherd, demonstrates compassion toward the sheep by providing the hospitality of his common grace for his people.

Reflection and Discussion

Read through the complete passage for this study, Mark 6:30–44. Then review the following questions and record your responses. (For further background, see the *ESV Study Bible*, pages 1905–1906, or visit esv.org.)

The Setting (Mark 6:30–37)

By referring to Jesus’ disciples as “the apostles”¹ (6:30) and recounting how the people “recognized them” (6:33) Mark shows how the disciples share in the popularity of Jesus. What do you think leads to Jesus’ concern for the hunger of the people (6:34), whereas his disciples argue that it was not their problem (6:37)?

The narrator says specifically that Jesus “had compassion on [the crowds of people], because they were like sheep without a shepherd” (6:34)? What does this reveal about Jesus’ character and mission? And how does the fact that Jesus both teaches (6:34) and feeds them (6:37) reflect compassion?

The disciples counter Jesus’ command to feed the crowds with an argument about money (see 6:37; “two hundred denarii” are about half a year’s wages).

How reasonable is the disciples' argument? How might Christians today be tempted to let money and finances affect ministry decisions?

The Miracle (Mark 6:38–41)

As the Creator (John 1:3), Jesus could have created food out of nothing, but he chooses to use the minimal resources available to him, even from a person in the crowd (Mark 6:38). Why might Jesus have chosen this way to provide, and how does God still provide for his people today through the resources that already exist?

Why do you think Jesus commanded the people to be divided into groups (6:39–40)? If we imagine those groupings as churches (the average church in America is between fifty and one hundred people), how does this scene reflect the way Jesus provides for every local church?

Jesus took the five loaves and two fish and blessed them (6:41). How does this provide an example for Christians to follow in the practice of thanksgiving? What are you thankful for today?

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The Conclusion (Mark 6:42–44)

Mark wants the reader to know that after the miraculous feeding every person in the crowd is “satisfied” (6:42). How is that significant, and how does Jesus, the Shepherd, still satisfy his sheep today?

The small resources result in an abundance of leftovers (6:43)—one basket for each doubting disciple to carry! What might the excess loaves and fish teach us about Jesus and his provision?

In light of the purpose of miracles, what does this miracle teach Christians about the person of Jesus (who he is) or the work of Jesus (what he has done for us)?



Read through the following three sections on *Gospel Glimpses*, *Whole-Bible Connections*, and *Theological Soundings*. Then take time to consider the *Personal Implications* these sections have for you.

Gospel Glimpses

JESUS LOVES. Jesus demonstrates his compassion in two separate ways during this miracle of fertility. First, he notices the confusion and helplessness of the

crowds and responds by drawing near and caring for them (6:34). This caring includes teaching the people about the things of God, as well as caring for their physical needs. Jesus truly cares for his people in word and in deed. Second, Jesus cares for the spiritual formation of his followers, whom he invites to share in the shepherding of the crowd. In this way Jesus teaches the church that they are not a cul-de-sac of God's grace but a conduit. As with the loaves and the fish, God uses the minimal resources of his people to provide his love to the world. Yet it is always his love given us through Jesus by the Holy Spirit, for "we love because he first loved us" (1 John 4:19).

JESUS FEEDS THE HUNGRY. This miracle makes a connection between ministering to the soul and ministering to the body. Ministry for Jesus always involves the whole person. Yet Christians are tempted to pick between the soul and the body, between soul-saving and physical work. But what "God has joined together, let not man separate" (Matt. 19:6). Even more, the gospel itself is about Jesus' feeding the hungry: "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied" (Matt. 5:6); "They shall hunger no more. . . . The Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd" (Rev. 7:16–17). Jesus will always feed his people, with loaves of wheat and as the bread of life (John 6:35).

Whole-Bible Connections

SHEEP WITHOUT A SHEPHERD. Jesus had compassion on the crowds because they were "like sheep without a shepherd" (Mark 6:34). This is an allusion to several passages in the Old Testament that mention directly the failure of Israel's leaders (cf. Num. 27:17; Ezek. 34:4–5). Jesus is a leader like none before and will provide fully for the needs of his people. This truth has long and progressive unveiling in the biblical story, with one of its clearest expressions when God promises an offspring leader to the shepherd-king David in 2 Samuel 7:11–16. The Old Testament kingship of Israel points to the coming King, Jesus, a faithful leader of his people who is full of compassion and grace.

THE SHEPHERD. In Psalm 23:1–4 we see a beautiful picture of God's care of his people through the image of a shepherd's tending to his flock. Sheep are easily scared animals, and the work of a shepherd includes constant attention, patience, and guidance. One aspect of this vocation is the reassurance of safety, which even includes encouraging the sheep to lie down in the pasture (see Ps. 23:2). Jesus enacts the image of the Good Shepherd by guiding the wayward crowds toward trusting him as Shepherd in having them sit down in the grass (Mark 6:39). The comparison is stark and serves as a message to Christ's church. Jesus will always care for his sheep in this way,

for “The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures” (Ps. 23:1).

Theological Soundings

COMMON GRACE. This crowd inevitably consists of many different people with a multitude of postures toward Jesus. Regardless of these people’s motives, Jesus has compassion on them and gives this hungry crowd his food. Jesus uses this miracle to demonstrate his benevolent compassion on all his image bearers—he does not pick favorites or exclude skeptics. His posture toward the crowds is one that should be emulated by his followers as we live, work, and minister in the world. This benevolence reflects God’s common grace, or the gifts of God as Creator. Just as the Father “makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust” (Matt. 5:45), so he gives loaves from the crops and fish from the sea to all people.

SPECIAL GRACE. Just as Jesus gives bread to the hungry, he is also the bread of life (John 6:35), which means he also provides a special grace that comes only by faith in him. If common grace is a reflection of God as Creator (think C for Creator), then special grace is a reflection of God as Savior (think S for Savior). Special grace is accomplished only through the death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus. Special grace is a grace for his disciples, the grace that forms and shapes them—a covenantal love for his followers by which they have unlimited access to Jesus as their Lord. The ministry of the church is strengthened when we recognize all things as coming from and reflecting either God’s common or special grace, for God is both Creator and Savior.

Personal Implications

Take some time to reflect on what you have learned from your study of Mark 6:30–44 and how it might apply to your own life today. Make notes below on the personal implications for your walk with the Lord of the (1) *Gospel Glimpses*, (2) *Whole-Bible Connections*, (3) *Theological Soundings*, and (4) this passage as a whole.

1. Gospel Glimpses

2. Whole-Bible Connections

3. Theological Soundings

4. Mark 6:30–44

As You Finish This Unit . . .

Jesus, the Shepherd, demonstrates his tender compassion and provision. Reflect on this truth in your own personal life and respond in prayers of adoration and thanksgiving.

Definitions

¹ **Apostle** – “One who is sent,” and who is an official representative of another. In the New Testament the word refers specifically to those whom Jesus chose to represent him.