
Luke 9:10-17

¹⁰ When the apostles returned, they explained to him what they had done. He took them and withdrew in private to a town called Bethsaida. ¹¹ The crowds, meanwhile, learned of this and followed him. He received them and spoke to them about the kingdom of God, and he healed those who needed to be cured. ¹² As the day was drawing to a close, the Twelve approached him and said, 'Dismiss the crowd so that they can go to the surrounding villages and farms and find lodging and provisions; for we are in a deserted place here.' ¹³ He said to them, 'Give them some food yourselves.' They replied, 'Five loaves and two fish are all we have, unless we ourselves go and buy food for all these people.' ¹⁴ Now the men there numbered about five thousand. Then he said to his disciples, 'Have them sit down in groups of (about) fifty.' ¹⁵ They did so and made them all sit down. ¹⁶ Then taking the five loaves and the two fish, and looking up to heaven, he said the blessing over them, broke them, and gave them to the disciples to set before the crowd. ¹⁷ They all ate and were satisfied. And when the leftover fragments were picked up, they filled twelve wicker baskets.

Context. This passage comes at a "breaking point" in St. Luke's narrative of the gospel. In Luke 8, we come to a "kind of ending" of the Galilean mission. Up to and through Luke 8 the accounts have focused on Jesus – the telling of parables (sower and the seed, 8:4-15; lamp, 8:16-18) and performance of miracles (calming of the sea, 8:22-25; healing of the demoniac, 8:26-39; healing of Jairus' daughter, 8:40-56). At the beginning of Luke 9, the Twelve are sent on mission, "*He summoned the Twelve and gave them power and authority over all demons and to cure diseases, and he sent them to proclaim the kingdom of God and to heal (the sick)*" (vv1-2). These were prophetic actions that Jesus had already given to the people and the leaders of the Jews. As the leaders began to reject Jesus, even while the outcasts begin to accept him, there is a growing vacuum of religious leadership. And thus Jesus, already having taught his disciples the meaning of the Kingdom, now sends them to proclaim God's reign in word and deed. We are only told of the summary of their missionary endeavors: "*Then they set out and went from village to village proclaiming the good news and curing diseases everywhere.*" (Luke 9:6)

Joel Green (352) provides us with additional context for the Lukan narrative: "The break between chs. 8 and 9 is not abrupt. In fact, the groundwork for the twin focus of 9:1–50, christology and discipleship, is laid in ch. 8, with its concerns with perceptiveness and active faith. This new section is distinguished from the previous one primarily by the explicitness of its portrayal of the disciples and by its heightened, even candid concern with Jesus' identity. Already in ch. 8, the presence of the disciples with Jesus had become more emphatic than at any other time since their being called in chs. 5–6. Now, however, they are active agents involved in the mission of Jesus, and they begin to be developed less as companions and more as characters in their own right within the larger narrative of Luke-Acts. The end of this new section is clearly marked, with Jesus departing from his divine mission in the region of Galilee (cf. 4:14–15; §10) in order to begin the meandering journey to Jerusalem (see 9:51, 53). Consequently, 9:1–50 should be regarded as a transitional unit, bringing the Galilean segment of Jesus' ministry to a close and setting the stage for the next major stage of his mission. With the closing of the Galilean section, the central issues of Jesus' identity and mission and the character of discipleship are on display in a way that renders necessary the more concentrated periods of discipleship instruction and formation that will characterize the journey."

Between the sending and the return of the disciples, there is a short episode: "⁷ Herod the tetrarch heard about all that was happening, and he was greatly perplexed because some were saying, 'John has been raised from the dead';⁸ others were saying, 'Elijah has appeared'; still others, 'One of the ancient prophets has arisen.'" ⁹ But Herod said, "John I beheaded. Who then is this about whom I hear such things?" And he kept trying to see him." (Luke 9:7-10) Clearly, Luke has raised the question of Jesus' identity – something that will continue to be revealed in what he does and what he calls others to do. By the same token, those who desire to see who Jesus is will see him only if they respond to his call to preach

the gospel, heal the sick, and feed the hungry. There is still truth in Albert Schweitzer's immortal words at the conclusion of *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*:

He speaks to us the same word: "Follow thou me!" and sets us to the tasks which He has to fulfil for our time. He commands. And to those who obey Him, whether they be wise or simple, He will reveal Himself in the toils, the conflicts, the sufferings which they shall pass through in His fellowship, and, as an ineffable mystery, they shall learn in their own experience Who He is."

The Call to Ministry. ¹⁰ *When the apostles returned, they explained to him what they had done. He took them and withdrew in private to a town called Bethsaida.* ¹¹ *The crowds, meanwhile, learned of this and followed him. He received them and spoke to them about the kingdom of God, and he healed those who needed to be cured.*

As part of the instruction for his disciples, it seems likely that Jesus wants to affirm their experience of mission and healing, as well as extend and continue the instructions as a means to prepare them for the soon-coming work of the nascent church. And the passage makes clear it was meant to form a respite and break from the missionary endeavors and make space in their life for quiet communal time with Jesus. Having participated successfully as his fellow workers in ministry, do they understand fully who Jesus is? Has their faith matured? We will see.

As for a private moment (v.10), alas, it was not to be. At one level the crowds relentless pursuit is intrusive, but nonetheless, hospitality is extended, and Jesus engages in a ministry of healing and of proclamation about the kingdom. This summary of his ministry is indistinguishable from the ministry in which the twelve had participated (vv.1–2, 6)—a reality that serves at least initially to blur even further any possible lines of distinction between their activity on God's behalf and his own.

Continued Lessons for Mission. ¹² *As the day was drawing to a close, the Twelve approached him and said, 'Dismiss the crowd so that they can go to the surrounding villages and farms and find lodging and provisions; for we are in a deserted place here.'* ¹³ *He said to them, 'Give them some food yourselves.'* *They replied, 'Five loaves and two fish are all we have, unless we ourselves go and buy food for all these people.'* ¹⁴ *Now the men there numbered about five thousand.*

There is some question as to how much of a "deserted place" they were actually in. The Greek *eremos* used by Luke definitely means "deserted or lonely place – even wilderness" but there is no transition from the geographical marker of Bethsaida. As Joel Green (363) points out:

Only when viewed against the backdrop of Jesus' prior instructions to the twelve does their request to him seem odd. Their location in the rural environs of Bethsaida places them in close proximity to the possibility of food and lodging; why not take advantage of it? Jesus, however, had earlier instructed his disciples to take no bread on the journey (v.3); thus, they were counseled to carry on the divine mission while trusting in divine benefaction and resources. Had they not trusted and been successful earlier? If one reaches further back into the Lukan narrative, one remembers Jesus' instructions on Simon's boat that had led to a miraculous catch of fish (5:1–11). If he was able to provide then, why not now? Even further back in the memory is Elisha's instructions to feed a hundred people with five barley loaves and fresh ears of grain (2 Kgs 4:42–44), the potential relevance of which is underscored by Luke's earlier use of Elisha-material to portray Jesus (e.g., 4:27). In light of their present location in the "wilderness," memories of God's provision of manna in the wilderness (Exodus 16; Numbers 11) might also be activated. In light of these narrative realities, could the twelve not continue to trust now, even if these fresh circumstances presented obstacles more severe than those they had yet faced? Against such a backdrop, the extraordinary nature of their request to send the crowd away is seen in their lack of any vocalized expectation that Jesus might be able to provide for their needs.

¹³ *He said to them, 'Give them some food yourselves.' They replied, 'Five loaves and two fish are all we have, unless we ourselves go and buy food for all these people.'*

The disciples' response cannot have been pleasing to Jesus' ears. True, their resources are few unless they either (a) buy food for the multitudes or (b) await upon a miracle from Jesus. Their long experience of life before Jesus becomes operative enforced by the fact they have taken no money (v.3). It seems as though Luke is describing the continuous test that awaits all who would minister in the name of Jesus. The presence of the crowds and their needs is unveiled as a test to their faith, a test in the face of which the disciples struggle. If the disciples' faith is not adequate on this occasion, this is surely due to the enormity of the problem with which they are confronted. The narrator seems to underscore this in a narrative aside at the beginning of v.14: "*Now the men there numbered about five thousand.*" Against the meager resources represented by five loaves and two fish, the need is great indeed. The stage is thus set for a manifestation of miraculous benevolence of immense proportions.

Then he said to his disciples, 'Have them sit down in groups of (about) fifty.' ¹⁵ *They did so and made them all sit down.* ¹⁶ *Then taking the five loaves and the two fish, and looking up to heaven, he said the blessing over them, broke them, and gave them to the disciples to set before the crowd.* ¹⁷ *They all ate and were satisfied. And when the leftover fragments were picked up, they filled twelve wicker baskets.*

The feeding of the people. The feeding of the five thousand had a meaning for the early church in the responsibility of the leaders to feed the flock, particularly with preaching and the Eucharist. This is the one miracle, apart from the resurrection, recounted in all four Gospels.

Luke's shares the story with the other gospel writers, but his account connects the feeding to the sending of the Twelve. Luke does not include Mark's mention of the compassion of Jesus for the people or the messianic allusion (Mark 6:34), but the abundance of good stands as a two-fold lesson to the Twelve: abundance is found not in the power to purchase with money, but in the power of the Lord; and, those who give receive back even more extravagantly. Both lessons reinforce what they have learned on their own journey.

As the other gospel writers, this miraculous feeding points forward to the Last Supper (Luke 22:9). But this account has another element on anticipation. Jesus here appears as one who provides food for the people – in other words, his authority to preach and heal is symbolized by table service. This is made explicit at the Last Supper when he tells the Twelve, "Am I not among you as the one who serves?" (22:27)

Joel Green (365-66) points notes the taking, blessing, breaking, giving as easily pointing to the Last Supper, but cautions that these are also actions expected of a pious Jew in preparation for eating. In addition, it is noted by many scholars (Culpepper, et. al.) that the significance of the two fish is not as easily explained as the symbolism of bread. Green holds that, in this context, there are more important meanings to be understood:

First, in light of the aforementioned question concerning his identity, Jesus' involvement in a miraculous feeding ties him into the prophetic tradition (2 Kgs 4:42–44) and helps to portray him against the background of the story of Exodus (Exod 16:4–36). Second, the close association of Jesus' communication of the kingdom of God and healing with the miraculous feeding of the multitudes intimates that the latter is itself an expression of the saving activity of God.³⁷ In fact, Mary had predicted that the hungry would be filled (1:53), and Jesus had interpreted the meaning of salvation, in part, as the filling of the hungry (6:21). In lifting his eyes to heaven, Jesus had recognized God as the source of this meal—that is, as the gracious Benefactor of these needy people. Jesus himself is presented, then, as the one through whom God's benefaction is present. In light of this, it is surely of significance that no repayment is demanded from those who have received: the mercy of God is extended to all without reference to predetermined boundaries and without incipient demands for reciprocity (cf. 6:32–36).

Third, once the boundary-setting and boundary-maintaining function of meals is recalled,³⁸ the failure of Jesus and his disciples either to observe this role or otherwise to encourage the crowds to observe practices affiliated with it is startling. Here are thousands of people, an undifferentiated mass of people, some undoubtedly unclean, others clean, some more faithful regarding the law, others less so. The food itself—is it clean? Has it been properly prepared? Have tithes been paid on it? Where is the water for washing in preparation for the table? Such concerns are so lacking from this scene that we might miss the extraordinary character of this meal, extraordinary precisely because these concerns are so completely absent.³⁹ No attempt has been made by Jesus and the twelve, this representation of the renewal of Israel, to preserve the social boundaries that characterize first-century Jewish life. Again, Luke’s narration underscores the degree to which God’s benefaction is without limits.

Finally, Luke observes not only that all ate and were filled, but also that twelve baskets of leftovers were collected. This underscores immediately the magnitude of the miracle, together with the superabundance of God’s good gifts (cf. 6:38). That there were twelve baskets full, within a narrative co-text wherein the presence of twelve apostles has been so emphatic (vv 1, 10, 12), insinuates further that the message of divine provision embodied in the miraculous feeding of the multitudes is intended for the twelve. The outstanding question, then, is whether they will “hear” this message. Will their hearing be one of genuine perception that manifests itself in the fruit of faith and faithfulness (cf. 8:4–21)?

Culpepper, R. Alan. “The Gospel of Luke.” *New Interpreter’s Bible*. Ed. Leander E. Keck. Vol. 9. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994–2004. 196–197. Print.

Notes

Luke 9:11 *He received them*: *apodechomai* is a Greek verb akin to receiving someone in hospitality. This is a theme carried over from the mission of the apostles just completed.

Luke 9:13 *Give them some food yourselves*: having just finished a mission in which they had accomplished great things in the name of the Lord, why is it that they suddenly lack the sense that all things are possible in God?

Luke 9:14 *five thousand*: Two OT events are often noted as providing the proper framework in which to understand Jesus’ feeding of the five thousand. First, the short account of Elisha’s feeding of a hundred men in 2 Kings 4:42–44 provides a number of structural parallels the presentation of the bread to the prophet (9:13; 2 Kings 4:42), the prophet’s order for the people to be fed (9:13; 2 Kings 4:42), the reaction of the prophet’s followers (9:13; 2 Kings 4:43), the new order from the prophet (9:14; 2 Kings 4:43), the distribution and eating of the bread (9:16; 2 Kings 4:44), and the note concerning the leftovers (9:17; 2 Kings 4:44).

As the Elisha story builds on the feeding of the Israelites in the wilderness (Exod. 16–18), so may the setting in the account of Jesus’ feeding of the five thousand evoke the same event (9:12; Exod. 16:1–3). Moreover, the connection between fish and quail is already made in Num. 11:22, 31, and thus the “five loaves and two fish” may be a reference to the manna and quail that God had provided for his people during the wilderness journey. Others have further traced this connection between birds and fish through Second Temple and rabbinic literature

Luke 9:16 *Then taking . . .*: the actions of Jesus recall the institution of the Eucharist in Luke 22:19

Luke 9:17 *They all ate and were satisfied*: This is a narrative fulfillment of the Beatitude, “*blessed are those who are hungry now, for they shall be filled*” (6:21). Both verses use the root word *chortazō* (satisfy). The **twelve wicker baskets** is a clear reference to Israel now cast in the scene of eschatological wellness.

Sources

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