

Mark: No Bread

Mark 8:1-21

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Now turn with me, if you would, to the Gospel of Mark. We are in Mark, chapter eight, and we're going to read together in a moment from Mark 8:1-21. This is the story of the feeding of the four thousand.

Just a while ago, at least in the Gospel of Mark it was just a while ago, there is, of course, a very similar incident in Mark's gospel of the feeding of the five thousand. And there has been as a consequence of that some debate and discussion as to why it is that the Gospel of Mark, and, for that matter, the Gospel of Matthew, contains what seems to be a repetition of a very similar miracle. And you wouldn't need to be Einstein to discern that those who have a bent to finding fault and error within the Scriptures have found one here.

And there have been those who have conjectured that what we have is just the repetition of the same miracle with some of the details changed, but actually there weren't two miracles, the one the feeding of the five thousand and another the feeding of the four thousand, but actually there was only one miracle. And because later in the first century and beginning of the second century the importance of Jesus was raised in the hearts and minds of His followers, so that the Christ of faith became different from the Jesus of history, the gospel writers and perhaps later redactors went back and sort of bolstered the story and added more and more miracles to make Jesus into something that the church had made Him, but He wasn't actually that in terms of His ministry here in the world and in Palestine.

Well, if you go to college these days I suppose if you study almost any liberal arts college and take a course in religion, this is the kind of thing that you will encounter. Some of our children encounter this in public schools: the so-called discrepancies that are to be found in the Gospels, and so we need to pause perhaps for a minute or two (I don't think it's worth more than a minute or two, but it is worth a minute or two) just to examine this issue.

What do we make of it? Well, of course we dismiss it all if we believe the Bible to be the infallible, inerrant word of God. We must accept the Bible as it is given to

us, and we have no choice here but to say there were actually two miracles. One was the feeding of the five thousand, and another was the feeding of the four thousand. But the details are significantly different.

One, the feeding of the five thousand, actually it's five thousand men in the specifics, in actual fact there may have been ten thousand if you count the women and the children, so there may have even been twelve thousand. Here the term is a much more generic term, so it's a much smaller crowd of four thousand, so it's four thousand as opposed to maybe ten or twelve thousand people.

Then, in the feeding of the five thousand the location is entirely different. The feeding of the five thousand took place on the north, perhaps east side of the Sea of Galilee. Luke specifies the area as being in the region of Bethsaida. This is in the region of Decapolis, and Decapolis is right down in the south and probably down to the east—may be, depending on whose geography you're following, it may even be about twenty miles or so from the coast. So it's a significant distance away from the feeding of the five thousand, and the details are different.

In the feeding of the five thousand there are five loaves and two fishes, and here it is seven loaves and a "few fish." And then the number of baskets that were collected of left-overs is different in the two stories. Then the population is different. The feeding of the five thousand is primarily in a location of Jews; this one is in a location primarily of Gentiles.

And there are other issues. Mark has Jesus in the incident that follows—we're about to read the incident that follows...the Lord Jesus and the disciples get into a boat, they make that journey all the way from the south coast of the Sea of Galilee all the way up to the north, and there's a discussion that takes place between Jesus and the disciples based on this feeding of the four thousand.

And not only that, but Jesus, according to Mark's Gospel, refers to both miracles. He refers to the feeding of the five thousand and the feeding of the four thousand in this discussion. Now it's one thing to say that the gospel writers make up a miracle; it's another thing for the gospel writers to make up words of Jesus; and if you can't trust the words of Jesus then we might as well all pack up and go home and forget all about it, because if that is true, there is nothing in the Bible at all that you can trust. And if you follow all of that *Jesus Seminar* and the *Quest for the Historical Jesus*, there is precisely nothing at all that they can find that they can rely upon.

Well, bless God that He's opened our eyes to trust in the living and abiding, and truthful and reliable words of God. Now let's give our attention to Mark 8:1-21. Let's pray together for the blessing of God.

Our Father in heaven, we thank You for the Bible, for the Scriptures that holy men of old wrote as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit, and every jot and tittle of it is utterly reliable and trustworthy. We pray now as we read this portion of Scripture together that You would come by Your Spirit, illuminate these words; cause us, enable us to understand what it is that they are saying, and write it upon our hearts, we pray for Jesus' sake. Amen.

This is God's holy and inerrant word:

In those days again, when there was a great multitude and they had nothing to eat, He called His disciples and said to them, 'I feel compassion for the multitude because they have remained with me now three days, and have nothing to eat; and if I send them away hungry to their home, they will faint on the way; and some of them have come from a distance.' And His disciples answered Him, 'Where will anyone be able to find enough to satisfy these men with bread here in a desolate place?' And He was asking them, 'How many loaves do you have?' And they said, 'Seven.' And He directed the multitude to sit down on the ground; and taking the seven loaves, He gave thanks and broke them, and started giving them to His disciples to serve to them, and they served them to the multitude. They also had a few small fish; and after He had blessed them, He ordered these to be served as well. And they ate and were satisfied; and they picked up seven large baskets full of what was left over of the broken pieces. And about four thousand were there; and He sent them away. And immediately He entered the boat with His disciples, and came to the district of Dalmanutha.

And the Pharisees came out and began to argue with Him, seeking from Him a sign from heaven, to test Him. And sighing deeply in His spirit, He said, 'Why does this generation seek for a sign? Truly I say to you, no sign shall be given to this generation.' And leaving them, He again embarked and went away to the other side.

And they had forgotten to take bread; and did not have more than one loaf in the boat with them. And He was giving orders to them, saying, 'Watch out! Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and the leaven of Herod.' And they began to discuss with one another the fact that they had no bread. And Jesus, aware of this, said to them, 'Why do you discuss the fact that you have no bread? Do you not yet see or understand? Do you have a hardened heart? Having eyes, do you not see? And having ears, do you not hear? And do you not remember when I broke the five loaves for the five thousand, how many baskets full of broken pieces you picked up?' They said to Him, 'Twelve.'

'And when I broke the seven for the four thousand, how many large baskets full of broken pieces did you pick up?'

And they said to Him, 'Seven.'

And He was saying to them, 'Do you not yet understand?'

Now, as we look at this passage together this evening...in the life and the ministry of Jesus it becomes evident that invariably our focus is drawn again and again not only to Jesus, but to His disciples, and to the way in the life of these disciples there seems to be a recurring pattern—a recurring pattern of growth and failure, and that pattern being evidenced not only individually in their lives, but corporately as a band of disciples.

Now this incident that we are looking at tonight...actually there are two incidents, and perhaps three incidents...but they are all intimately related together, and what we have here is a demonstration of how Jesus grows us as His disciples, and how He does that on the occasion of what seems to be a fairly catastrophic failure on the part of these disciples. Out of that failure Jesus grows His disciples.

After the miracle of the feeding of the four thousand is over, they get into a boat, and they go to a certain location. The Pharisees are there, and there's a discussion between the Pharisees and Jesus about signs. And then as they go further in this boat and they make their way all the way north to Bethsaida, there breaks out between the disciples and Jesus a discourse, a conversation. It's more than a conversation. It's one of those teaching sessions in which Jesus, out of their failure, causes His disciples to see something that is vitally important.

The disciples had forgotten to take bread with them. Now, you have to see surely that Mark intends that, at least on one level, to be somewhat amusing. Because they've just been feeding the four thousand, and they've been distributing bread to this enormous crowd of people, and they get into the boat, and lo and behold, they've got no bread! And because they've got no bread an argument breaks out among these disciples, and in the midst of that argument Jesus is teaching a lesson. And it's a crucial lesson. It's a lesson that underlines that our growth in grace as disciples is rarely linear; and that in our discipleship, yours and mine, there very often can be moments of catastrophic failure followed by lessons that are learned from that failure, and discipleship that is patterned after the teaching of our Lord.

Now my dear friends, the question that I want to ask you tonight is a very simple one. Do you want to grow in discipleship? Do you want to grow in grace? Is that your longing and desire this evening? Then watch and learn from the Master as He instructs these disciples of His in a boat. The disciples had failed to read the manual of providence. They had failed to read the manual of providence, and as a consequence they made a catastrophic failure.

Now let's go back to the context. Thousands of people, four thousand people

have gathered in the region of Decapolis. And most of these are Gentiles, and most of these have come from a considerable distance, and Jesus feeds them. Now, some of the lessons to be learned from the feeding of the four thousand are precisely the same lessons as we learned from the feeding of the five thousand, so I'm not going to address the passage in that way. I want us to see that the way into the narrative of the feeding of the four thousand is to see the lessons that Jesus instructs in the narratives that follow in the boat with His disciples. And what we see is a morphology of spiritual declension...a morphology of spiritual declension, and it follows three particular lines of thought: Forgetfulness of mind; hardness of heart; and, dullness of perception.

I. First of all, forgetfulness of mind.

Look at verse 18. Look at the question that Jesus puts to these disciples in the boat: "Having eyes, do you not see? And having ears, do you not hear? And do you not remember...?" Don't you remember...? Now think about it! Just hours before, perhaps it was days before—we don't know how long it was that the incident with the Pharisees was, but it's not that long ago in their conscious memory that they were engaged as instruments in an astonishing miracle in feeding the four thousand with seven loaves and a few fish. And Jesus is saying to them now in the boat, when they have forgotten to take bread and they're quarrelling amongst themselves, and Jesus is saying, 'Look! Stop! Don't you remember?'

"Remember, remember, the fifth of November." Doesn't mean anything to you, but if you're British, it's Guy Fawkes—you know, the man who tried to blow up the houses of Parliament. It's one of those little ditties, you know, that you learn in school: "Remember, remember, the fifth of November."

Two times in this story Mark is bringing to the surface the fact that they've forgotten something. The first occasion is back in verse four. It's actually during the feeding of the four thousand itself. You remember what it is that they ask? They say to Jesus...His disciples come to Jesus and they say, 'How can one feed these people with bread here in this desolate place?' Isn't that an astonishing question to ask?...because it's as though they blanked out on the previous miracle. How can the disciples possibly be asking this question, when they had just months before been involved in the feeding of the four thousand on the northern coast of the Sea of Galilee.

Now in the feeding of the five thousand, the question that they'd asked was about where shall we find enough money to buy bread. Now the question is a little different. It's not where can we find the money—it may be that there is no money now. It may be that Judas has already begun to siphon off the money. It's not that we've actually got the money, but where can we find somewhere to buy this bread; it's we're out in a desolate place, and there is nowhere whatsoever, not a

single place to buy this bread, to purchase this bread.

They've forgotten. They have forgotten. They have failed to read the manual of providence.

And then in verse 14, now they're in the boat, and they only have this one loaf, and Jesus is saying to them as they begin to quarrel amongst themselves, and perhaps blames themselves and say one to the other—and can you hear them say, “Well, you should have brought the bread” and “I thought you were bringing the bread”—and Jesus is saying, “Don't you remember? What is it with you people? What is it with you children that you fail to remember?”

I can't help but think of the words of Moses in the Book of Deuteronomy, on the plains of Moab as the people of God are about to cross over into the land of Canaan, and they will move from that position where they were provided for on a daily basis in terms of the manna of provision. Moses says to the people as they confront now all of the splendor of the land of Canaan that's flowing with milk and honey...you remember? On the plains of Moab he says to them, “Whatever else you do, do not forget...” Deuteronomy, chapter eight: “Do not forget! Remember how the Lord your God led you all the way in the desert these forty years.” Do you see the lesson that Moses is teaching the people of God? That the people of God, that's you and me, have a propensity to forget the provision of Almighty God. And because we forget the Lord, and we forget His past activity, and we forget His providence in our lives, spiritual disaster follows in its wake.

Remember, remember what God has done in your life. Are you here tonight all caught up with the problems of this world? All wrapped up in the trials that have befallen you, and you have forgotten what it is that God has done for you in the past, and that God is the same God, and that He never changes?

Remember when Joshua was passing over the River Jordan, and he set those memorial stones in the river, and on the river bank of the River Jordan? Why? So that the generations to come, in looking at those memorial stones would remember the mighty acts of God. Only hours before, they had witnessed the greatness of God, and they had forgotten already. They've forgotten already. And a man and a woman with a heart for God will be someone who is determined to remember the Lord. Remember Him! And remember what He has done for you, and remember what He has promised to do for you. Forgetfulness of mind is the first thing.

II. And hardness of heart is the second thing.

Reading between the lines in verse 17, they're having a fair old disagreement about this matter of bread—whose fault it was, perhaps; how they are going to manage now to survive this long journey in the boat across the sea, when their

stomachs are rumbling. And Jesus says to them, "Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees, and that of Herod."

Now, that's a strange sort of statement to make, isn't it? "Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees, and that of Herod."

Before they had set out, the Pharisees had come to Jesus and they'd asked for a sign. And Jesus, according to Mark's record here, Jesus uttered this great sigh, and said to them, "No sign will be given to this generation."

The sign-seekers...you may imagine tonight that you would believe if a man or a woman were to be raised from the dead. A woman comes into this building, and she has been lying in the mortuary, and she walks—opens that back door, and she walks down this aisle. And you know what we would be saying? We would be saying, "How terrible that they should ever have pronounced her dead when she was obviously alive." That's what we would be saying.

You want a real miracle? You want a real miracle? You've got one right here! In your hands, before you: the Bible, the word of God. Two million words, forty different authors, fifteen hundred years; Hebrew, Aramaic, Greek; and every jot and tittle of it given by inspiration of God, that "holy men of old wrote as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit," that the Bible has been preserved through the centuries by the singular care and providence of Almighty God. You want a miracle? It's right here in your hands, supervised by God, telling me all that I need to know about Him; telling me how my sins may be forgiven; telling me how I may come to know Him; telling me how I may live my life as a Christian.

And these Pharisees weren't interested in miracles. They were simply interested in confirming their unbelief. And Jesus says to these disciples of His—His disciples, mind you!—"Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees, and that of Herod."

And what is He talking about? Look at verse 17. He's talking about hardness of heart. A hardness of heart: and what is that? What is that hardness of heart? It's a propensity of our sinful hearts to the spiral of our gravitational pull to justify ourselves rather than look to Jesus. It's unbelief. It's unbelief.

They should have been filled with joy. They should have been enraptured by the sheer fact that sitting there in the boat was the Son of God, the Lord of Glory, the One who had walked on the water, the One who had said to the winds and the waves, "Be still!" The One who had healed the daughter of that Syrophenician woman; the One who had unstopped the deaf ears of that man; the One who had fed the five thousand and the four thousand, and He's there, sitting right in the boat with them, but they cannot see Him! They cannot see Him, and they're wrapped up in themselves, and they're wrapped up in their problems, and they're accusing each other, and they're quarreling and they're discontent. And Jesus is saying to them, "Beware...beware of the leaven of the Pharisees."

Beware of that leaven of unbelief. Beware of that leaven that constantly looks to yourself, that looks to yourself to get yourself out of problems and difficulties. Look at the language He employs in verse 17: "...having eyes, but you cannot see; having ears, but you cannot hear..." It's language that's taken directly from the prophet Jeremiah. It's taken from the fifth chapter of the prophet Jeremiah, and it's language that Jesus has used before in the Gospel of Mark, in chapter four, and on that occasion He was referring to unbelievers. He was referring to those who were outside of His covenant, in chapter four of Mark. And now—and this is the scary thing—now, He's applying those very words to His own disciples. And do you see what He's saying?

Do you see what He's saying? They're behaving in this boat as though they weren't believers at all. They are so wrapped up in themselves...they are so wrapped up in themselves that they're behaving and they're talking as though they are not believers at all. When you quarrel this way, and when you put Me out of the picture, and when you behave in this fashion, Jesus seems to be saying, it's as though you weren't believers at all. Beware! Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and of Herod.

III. Forgetfulness of mind, and hardness of heart, and the morphology of spiritual declension takes a third form, and that is dullness of perception.

Dullness of perception—look at the question that He puts in verse 21 to the disciples: "Don't you get it? Don't you get it, my friends? My dear, dear disciples, after all that you've seen, and after all that you've heard, after all that you've witnessed, don't you get it yet?"

These are words, you know...this miracle story...Mark intends, I think, for us to pick up the language here of the prophet Isaiah. You remember that wonderful passage in Isaiah 55:

"Ho! Everyone that thirsteth! Come ye to the waters and buy, come buy wine and milk without money and without price. Why do you spend money on that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy?"

And here is Jesus giving them bread, and there are all kinds of Messianic overtones about what Jesus is doing, and Jesus is saying to His disciples, you know, when Messiah comes, these are the sort of things that He does. Don't you get it? Don't you understand Who it is that I am? Don't you understand the implication of what it is that I am doing, and what it is that I am saying to you? Because if you understood who I really am, you wouldn't be behaving this way. You wouldn't be quarreling this way. You wouldn't be accusing each other this way. You wouldn't constantly be putting Me out of the picture in this way. You wouldn't be so constantly discontent in the way that you are.

My friends, what difference does it make...what difference does it make to us tonight that Jesus is our Lord and Savior, and Prophet and Priest and King? Who is Jesus, this Jesus in whom we believe, this Jesus to whom we've come in prayer this evening? Is He the Son of God, as Mark says in his opening verse of his gospel? Because if He's the Son of God, I tell you, it will make all the difference in the world...it'll make all the difference in the world.

It's not that if they had recognized Jesus He'd have given them a Happy Meal™ there in the boat. It's not that if they had recognized who Jesus was that there would be no trials and no difficulties. No! But through those trials and through those difficulties their eyes would be locked on Jesus, persevering even to the end. Their faith, Calvin says, must have been laid asleep. Their faith, if there was faith must have been laid asleep.

You know, if the theme of last week's message dealing with the man who was deaf...you remember?...if the theme of last week's message was "Can You Hear Me Now?" the theme of this week's message is "Can You See Me Now?" Can you see Me now? Do you see who I really am? Because if you could see who I really am, you wouldn't be concerned about the fact that you've only got one loaf. That would be about the least significant thing in your agenda just now.

Can you see Him now, my friend?

"Turn your eyes upon Jesus; look full in His wonderful face,
And the things of earth will grow strangely dim
In the light of His glory and grace."

Let's pray together.

Our gracious God and ever blessed Father, we thank You for your dear, dear Son, our Savior, Jesus Christ. We fail Him again, and again, and again. We feel ourselves to be so very much like these disciples, who, having experienced wonderful blessings, immediately turn to self-accusation and to spirals of despair, and to clouds of darkness that engulf us. Help us to discern here the Master warning us of the leaven of the Pharisees and of Herod; of the propensity within each one of us to forget You; of our inability to perceive and to focus on Who Jesus really is. And grow us, we pray tonight; refocus our minds and hearts, and wills and affections that we might see none but Jesus only. For Jesus' sake we ask it. Amen.

Please stand and receive the Lord's benediction.

Grace, mercy and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ be with you all. Amen.

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