

Feeding the Thousands

Taken together, the feeding of the Four Thousand, and the feeding of the Five Thousand provide a wonderful exhortation illustrating how the Lord will provide for those who seek to follow him. As we seek to prepare our minds for the memorial of the greatest provision of all, we shall find much encouragement from these things which took place so long ago.

Mark chapter 8 recounts the feeding of the Four Thousand, which took place “in the wilderness” (verse 4). The people had evidently followed the Master away from the towns and cities to a wilderness place, without consideration of how their physical needs would be met. Remaining with the Master for three days, it was Messiah, and not the people who instigated the preparation of food for their hunger:

“I have compassion on the multitude, because they have now been with me three days, and have nothing to eat: and if I send them away fasting to their own houses, they will faint by the way: for divers of them came from far” (Mark 8:2-3).

In these events, we can see principles that govern our position. We, like the people of old, who followed the Master, follow him “without the camp”. So it is written:

“Let us go therefore unto him without the camp, bearing his reproach” (Heb. 12:13).

And whilst in that state, we trust in our Lord to provide. Like those people who sought the Master with scant regard to their physical needs, we are among those who “seek first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness” with the promise that: “all these things shall be added unto you” (Mat. 6:33). This was the confidence of the people of old: although they knew not how, they knew that Messiah would provide for those who left the towns, and sought after him in the wilderness.

There is a parallel situation with Israel during the days of Moses. The record of Exodus records how the people departed from Egypt, to pass through the wilderness as they went towards the Promised Land. However, unlike those who sought Messiah, the people in those days murmured against Moses:

“the whole congregation of the children of Israel murmured against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness: And the children of Israel said unto them, Would to God that we had died by the hand of Yahweh in the land of Egypt ... for ye have brought us forth into the wilderness, to kill this whole assembly with hunger” (Exo. 16:2-3).

So it was that the murmurers “tempted God in their heart by asking meat for their lust. Yea, they spake against God; they said, Can God furnish a table in the wilderness?” (Psa. 78:18-19). And in his mercy, God provided for them:

“then Yahweh said unto Moses, Behold, I will rain bread from heaven for you: and the people shall go out and gather a certain rate every day, that I may prove them, whether they will walk in my law or no” (Exod. 16:4).

Accordingly, God provided “bread from heaven,” in the wilderness, to meet his people’s material needs. There were a number of types of Manna: the bread that lasted a day, the bread that lasted two days so that the Sabbath could be kept, and the bread that was taken and placed within the Ark of the Covenant, and which never corrupted. It is this latter type of Manna which is of interest to our particular

considerations, the Manna that never corrupted. This same Manna is referred to in the book of Revelation, where it is described as the “hidden Manna”, as it could not be seen in the ark:

“he that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the ecclesias; To him that overcometh will I give to eat of the hidden Manna ...” (Rev. 2:17).

Seeing no corruption, the Hidden Manna speaks of eternal things, particularly our Lord Jesus Christ, who will provide immortality for those come to partake of him. This is the Manna that Christ gives to those who overcome, and by a figure, our lives are hidden with it. So it is written: “ye are dead, and your life is hid with Christ in God” (Col. 3:3).

This allusion to the Manna is picked up in the account of the feeding of the five thousand, and the discourse that followed. Here, the people became attracted to Christ, “because [they] did eat of the loaves, and were filled”. As materialistic as the human spirit is, once granted, they desired free food from Christ, rather than the spiritual principles that the miracles testified to. So Jesus rebuked and exhorted them:

“Labour not for the meat which perisheth, but for that meat which endureth unto everlasting life, which the Son of Man shall give unto you ...” (Jno. 6:27).

Notice the allusion here, back to the “hidden Manna” – “that meat which endureth unto everlasting life”, which is said to be given by “the Son of Man”.

Earlier on in John chapter 6, we have the actual feeding of the five thousand. Testing Philip, the Master asked: “Whence shall we buy bread, that these may eat?” (Jno. 6:5). Philip responded by pointing out that they had insufficient money to purchase enough food to feed them all. What was to be done? They only had five loaves of barley and two small fish – how could this feed the multitudes? The answer was that Jesus would provide bread without money, and without price: a gift of grace:

“Jesus took the loaves; and when he had given thanks, he distributed to the disciples, and the disciples to them that were set down; and likewise on the fishes as much as they would” (Jno. 6:11).

This was bread for which they gave no labour, which was provided freely by the Son of God. The allusion is to Isaiah 55:

“Ho every one that thirsteth, come ye to the waters, and he that hath no money; come ye, buy and eat: yea, come, buy wine and milk without money and without price: wherefore do ye spend money for that which is not bread? And your labour for that which satisfieth not? Hearken diligently unto me, and eat that which is good, and let your soul delight itself in fatness” (Isa. 55:1-2).

So, the Master is able to provide spiritual bread, which, when partaken of, is far better than the bread that perishes. The people sought a further sign from Christ, saying:

“What sign shewest thou then, that we may see, and believe thee? What doest thou work? Our fathers did eat Manna in the desert: as it is written, He gave them bread from heaven to eat” (Jno. 6:30-31).

Clearly, the people were tempting the Lord, they wanted more free food, and did not share the same spirit as those in the beginning, who sought the Lord more than their necessary food. Jesus, however, brought them to consider the “true bread from heaven”, which is Messiah himself, being begotten through the Holy Spirit which came from Heaven. Being of Divine Origin, Jesus was “the bread of life,” saying:

“I am the bread of life: he that cometh to me shall never hunger; and he that believeth in me shall never thirst” (Jno. 6:35).

By contrast to the Fathers who ate the Manna and were dead; Christ is able to provide sustenance that saves the soul. The bread of life that he provides is incorruptible, and will confer endless life to those who would partake of it – and this we can do only through faith in Messiah, and obedience to the Gospel.

The narrative in John chapter 6 describes how the Master “took the loaves; and when he had given thanks, he distributed to the disciples ...” (Jno. 6:11). The fact of him giving thanks was an implicit acknowledgment that Yahweh is the provider: he gave thanks to his Father. This comes out again in Christ’s words. As we already saw, the Jews asked a sign of more free food saying: “Our fathers did eat Manna in the desert; as it is written, He gave them bread from heaven to eat”. The Master, however, said: “Verily, verily, I say unto you, Moses gave you not that bread from heaven; but my Father giveth you the true bread from heaven ...” (Jno. 6:31-32).

Moses did not provide bread in the wilderness: Yahweh was the provider. And in the personage of His Son, He gave a better bread, the bread of life. Evidently, the people did not acknowledge the source of their blessings, or indeed what the blessing was. So the ancient prophet wrote: “she did not know that I gave her corn, and wine, and oil, and multiplied her silver and gold which they prepared for Baal” (Hos. 2:8). Attributing their blessings to the false deities that they worshipped, the people did not recognise Yahweh as provider. Accordingly, neither did they recognise Jesus of Nazareth as the true bread of life, who could sustain them through their journey to the coming kingdom.

The record continues to show the means by which the bread was distributed: “and Jesus said, Make the men sit down. Now there was much grass in the place. So the men sat down, in number about five thousand” (Jno. 6:10).

The narrative is careful to note that “there was much grass in the place”. This brings to mind the teaching of John the Baptist, which we considered in an earlier article (page 10). His message was:

“all flesh is grass, and all the goodliness thereof is as the flower of the field: The grass withereth, the flower fadeth: because the spirit of Yahweh bloweth upon it; surely the people is grass. The grass withereth: but the word of our God shall stand for ever” (Isa. 40:6-8).

In being seated upon the “much grass” which was in the place, the men were being taught a lesson from nature, that they themselves were like the grass which withers under the heat of the sun, and fades at the spirit of Yahweh being blown upon it. They needed salvation, and that could only come from them hearing and heeding the word preached.

Interestingly, the record in Isaiah 40 proceeds to speak of the Master:

“he shall feed his flock like a shepherd: he shall gather the lambs with his arm, and carry them in his bosom, and shall gently lead those that are with young: (Isa. 40:11).

In these things, we think of Messiah caring for the people in the wilderness, as with sheep. Feeding them, nurturing them, teaching them, and healing their sick, we see the care of Jesus as being the Good Shepherd watching over the flock of God.

THE KINGDOM

The Miracles that Jesus did were a taste of the greater blessings which shall abound in the Kingdom to come. Instructing the multitudes, Jesus said: “blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness: for they shall be filled” (Mat. 6:6). These are not like those who sought free food in the wilderness, but those who seek the things that only the Master can provide, in due time. In seeking first the kingdom of God, and His Righeousness, we set our hearts on the days to come, when our spiritual appetite will be filled, and we will hunger no more. Nothing that man can provide can have this effect, only the Bread of Life, which comes from heaven.

But in the Kingdom, the blessings will not be restricted to those in the wilderness, but will abound throughout all the earth:

“in this mountain shall Yahweh of Armies make unto all people a feast of fat things, a feast of wines on the lees, of fat things full of marrow, of wines on the lees well refined” (Isa. 25:6).

This description does not only speak of the physical blessings, when the earth will yield it’s fruit in abundance, but of spiritual blessings. We know this, for the prophet continues:

“And he will destroy in this mountain the face of the covering cast over all people, and the veil that is spread over all nations. He will swallow up death in victory: and the Lord Yahweh will wipe away tears from off all faces; and the rebuke of his people shall he take away from off all of the earth: for Yahweh hath spoken it” (Isa. 25:7-8).

This is the greatest provision of all. Each week, we come to remember the One who was the bread of life, by partaking of a piece of natural bread, and a sip of ordinary wine. In these simple things, we acknowledge Yahweh as our provider, and we look to the day when we shall be given to eat of the “hidden Manna”, the Bread from Heaven that gives true life to those who seek it. Following our Master “without the camp” into a spiritual wilderness, we await that day with great anticipation. We seek the things pertaining to the kingdom more than our necessary food (Cp. Job 23:12). We trust that God will provide, not only the requirements of a mortal existence, but also the spiritual food of His Word. And we look to that coming day when the nations shall learn righteousness, and be fed with the fat things which give life, and satisfy the soul. May that day come quickly!

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