

# The Lesson of the Loaves



## JESUS: THE PROPHET LIKE MOSES

When Jesus feeds the multitude by multiplying bread, it is not lost on the people that he is the Prophet Moses predicted. Yet, the people - and even the disciples - fail to understand what this prophetic role would entail.

BY DR. JIM SIBLEY

The feeding of the 5,000 is the only miracle recorded by all four Gospels.[1] This story is well-known, but many are not familiar with the lesson of the loaves. This is the lesson Jesus intended his disciples to learn, both in the first century and today. It begins with an understanding that this incident was designed to reveal Jesus' identity as the Prophet-like-Moses, and what that means for those who encounter him.

Near the end of Moses' life, he asked the Lord to appoint a leader for Israel, "so that the congregation of the Lord will not be like sheep that have no shepherd." [2] The immediate need was answered with the designation of Joshua to lead the people in the conquest of the Land, but the ultimate answer would be the Prophet promised by the Lord in Deuteronomy 18:15-19. In the New Testament, we read that Jesus saw a large multitude of Jewish people "and felt compassion for them because they were like sheep without a shepherd." [3] He viewed Israel with compassion, even as Moses had, and he recognized their need for a shepherd.

The Israelites in the wilderness were hungry. Their grumbling stomachs told them so, and their own grumbling against Moses let him know that they were not happy with either Moses or the Lord. [4]



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The Galilean multitude was not as mutinous as their ancestors, but they were also hungry, and the disciples came to Jesus and said, "This place is secluded and the hour is already past to eat; send the crowds away, so that they may go into the villages and buy food for themselves." Jesus' response is curious: "They do not need to go; you give them something to eat." It is true that Jesus had already taught them to pray, "Give us this day our daily bread,"[5] but he hadn't asked them to pray for other people's food.

While in the wilderness, God told Moses that he would "rain bread from heaven for you," and Moses then promised the Israelites that "in the morning you shall be filled with bread." [6] The same lesson God wanted the Israelites to learn also needed to be taught to the disciples. Shortly after the feeding of the 5,000, the disciples were in a boat with Jesus and realized that they had not brought enough bread. Jesus overheard their concerns and asked, "Why are you discussing the fact that you have no bread? Do you not yet comprehend or understand? ... When I broke the five loaves for the 5,000, how many baskets full of broken pieces did you pick up?" They said to Him, "Twelve." ... And he was saying to them, "Do you not yet understand?" [7]

Moses told his people that God had allowed them to be hungry and fed them with manna in order to humble them and to teach them "that man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by everything that proceeds out of the mouth of the Lord." [8] When Jesus was in the wilderness, he used this verse when hungry in resisting the temptation of Satan. [9] Physical bread, though necessary, was never Jesus' priority. The priority of God's Word, both the written

Word and the living Word, was essential for his disciples to understand, for immediately following the feeding of the 5,000, Jesus devoted some time to teach this to them (and to us). [10] This bread, even as the manna, would only meet a temporary need. What was really needed was Jesus, "the Bread that came down out of heaven." [11]

Jesus wanted his hearers to know that he was the Prophet-like-Moses that had been prophesied, who would teach and act with God's authority. Even though the multitude saw that Jesus was this very Prophet, "they intended to take him by force to make him king." [12] His kingdom will come, but his earthly ministry was that of the Prophet. This Prophet is also identified as the Suffering Servant, who would be killed and yet rise again for the forgiveness of sin. [13] This was by far the greater need. Although they saw him as Prophet, they still didn't understand.

On another occasion, when Jesus had appeared to the disciples while walking on the water, they were astonished at his power over the wind and the water. Mark explains their astonishment with the comment, "they had not gained any insight from the incident of the loaves." [14] The implication is that the feeding of the 5,000 was intended to teach not only his identity as the Prophet, but more importantly, that as the Bread of Heaven, he is the source of everything we need, both physically and spiritually.

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## Footnotes

1. Matt 14:13–21; Mark 6:32–44; Luke 9:10–17; and John 6:1–15.
2. Num 27:17.
3. Mark 6:34.
4. Exod 16.
5. Matt 6:11.
6. Exod 16:4, 8, 12.
7. Mark 8:14–21.
8. Deut 8:3.
9. Matt 4.
10. John 6:22–71.
11. John 6:58.
12. John 6:14–15.
13. Isa 52:13–53:12. See also G. P. Hugenberger, "The Servant of the Lord in the 'Servant Songs' of Isaiah: A Second Moses Figure," in *The Lord's Anointed: Interpretations of Old Testament Messianic Texts*, edited by Philip E. Satterthwaite, Richard S. Hess, and Gordon J. Wenham (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995), 105–40.
14. Mark 6:48–52.

