Matthew 14:13-21
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Now when Jesus heard about John, He withdrew from there in a boat to a secluded place by Himself; and when the people heard of this, they followed Him on foot from the cities. When He went ashore, He saw a large crowd, and felt compassion for them and healed their sick. When it was evening, the disciples came to Him and said, “This place is desolate and the hour is already late; so send the crowds away, that they may go into the villages and buy food for themselves.” But Jesus said to them, “They do not need to go away; you give them something to eat!” They said to Him, “We have here only five loaves and two fish.” And He said, “Bring them here to Me.” Ordering the people to sit down on the grass, He took the five loaves and the two fish, and looking up toward heaven, He blessed the food, and breaking the loaves He gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds, and they all ate and were satisfied. They picked up what was left over of the broken pieces, twelve full baskets. There were about five thousand men who ate, besides women and children. (Matt 14:13-21 NASB)

The feeding of the multitude is the only miracle mentioned in all four Gospel accounts (Matt 14:13-21; Mark 6:30-44; Luke 9:10-17; John 6:1-14).

The New American Standard Bible begins this section with the clause, “Now when Jesus heard about John” (Matt 14:13a). However, the words in italics—about John—are not found in the Greek text (which reads, Ἀκούσας δὲ ὁ Ἰησοῦς) and were added by the translators. What did Jesus hear? Matthew had previously informed us that when Herod the tetrarch heard about Jesus, he said, “This is John the Baptist; he has risen from the dead, and that is why miraculous powers are at work in him” (Matt 14:2). Rather than Jesus hearing about what happened to John, it seems better to understand that Jesus heard about Herod’s statement in which he was confused about Jesus and thought He was John the Baptist risen from the dead. Here was an instance where perception was not equal to reality (P≠R). Herod the tetrarch, operating under a guilty conscience and faulty thinking made a false connection between John the Baptist and Jesus. Thomas Constable writes:

Since [Matthew] verses 3–12 are an excursus, the opening words of this pericope must refer to Herod’s response to Jesus’ ministry. When Jesus heard that, He withdrew from Herod’s animosity and his territory (cf. 12:15). Evidently Jesus believed Herod Antipas would oppose Him as he had opposed His forerunner.

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1 Tom Constable, Tom Constable’s Expository Notes on the Bible (Galaxie Software, 2003), Mt 14:13.
When Jesus heard about Herod’s statement, the result was, “He withdrew from there in a boat to a secluded place by Himself; and when the people heard of this, they followed Him on foot from the cities” (Matt 14:13). This is the first of several occasions where Jesus withdrew from the crowds (Matt 15:21, 29; 17:1).

Matthew seems to suggest that Jesus’ departure was intended to avoid unnecessary conflict with Herod. Herod had already proven himself an immoral man who was willing to murder God’s righteous servant for no other reason than to fulfill a rash and foolish vow given to a girl who pleased him with a dance (Matt 14:3-12). Furthermore, Herod was not rational, as He confused Jesus with John the Baptist. Jesus was not afraid of Herod, but neither did He expose Himself to unnecessary conflict and harm. Matthew Henry states:

In times of peril, when God opens a door of escape, it is lawful to flee for our own preservation, unless we have some special call to expose ourselves. Christ’s hour was not yet come, and therefore he would not thrust himself upon suffering. He could have secured himself by divine power, but because his life was intended for an example, he did it by human prudence; he departed by ship.2

In Mark’s Gospel, Jesus had told His disciples, “Come away by yourselves to a secluded place and rest a while” (Mark 6:31a), and then Mark comments, “For there were many people coming and going, and they did not even have time to eat” (Mark 6:31b). Whereas Matthew implies Jesus left the region to avoid unnecessary conflict with Herod, Mark informs us it also met the need for rest. Physical rest is a necessity for those who engage in regular ministry. Lewis Chafer wrote, “It is a serious thing to remove the element of relaxation and play from any life. We cannot be normal physically, mentally or spiritually if we neglect this vital factor in human life.”3

The people who had previously been with Jesus heard where He was going and, traveling by foot, met Him at His destination. Luke tells us Jesus’ destination was “to a city called Bethsaida” (Luke 9:10), which was located on the northeastern shoreline of the Sea of Galilee.

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Matthew records, “When He went ashore, He saw a large crowd, and felt compassion for them and healed their sick” (Matt 14:14). Jesus’ display of compassion is seen in His healing their sick. Luke tells us, “Seeing the people, He felt compassion for them, because they were distressed and dispirited like sheep without a shepherd” (Matt 9:36). And Mark adds, “When Jesus went ashore, He saw a large crowd, and He felt compassion for them because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and He began to teach them many things” (Mark 6:34). The last clause in Mark is noteworthy, because Jesus—the Great Shepherd—fed them with God’s Word. That’s what a pastor/shepherd is supposed to do. God had told Jeremiah, “I will give you shepherds after My own heart, who will feed you on knowledge and understanding” (Jer 3:15).

After healing their sick and teaching them God’s Word, the day was coming to a close. Matthew records, “When it was evening, the disciples came to Him and said, ‘This place is desolate and the hour is already late; so send the crowds away, that they may go into the villages and buy food for themselves’” (Matt 14:15). There were nearby villages where the people could have gone and purchased their own meals, and this seemed like a practical solution. “But Jesus said to them, ‘They do not need to go away; you give them
something to eat!’” (Matt 14:16). Here, Jesus put the disciples in an impossible place. John informs us that Jesus said this to the disciples in order to test them, “for He Himself knew what He was intending to do” (John 6:6b). “They said to Him, ‘We have here only five loaves and two fish.’ And He said, ‘Bring them here to Me’” (Matt 14:17-18). Looking at their own meager resources, the disciples knew they could not meet Jesus’ request. Jesus knew He could; therefore, He told His disciples, “Bring them here to Me.” Matthew records:

Ordering the people to sit down on the grass, He took the five loaves and the two fish, and looking up toward heaven, He blessed the food, and breaking the loaves He gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds, 20 and they all ate and were satisfied. They picked up what was left over of the broken pieces, twelve full baskets. (Matt 14:19-20)

After blessing the food, Jesus then multiplied the bread and fish and gave it to the disciples, who, in turn, handed it out to the crowds. It could be that each time the disciples returned to Jesus, He had food ready for them to hand out. After everyone had eaten and was satisfied, there was food left over for Jesus’ twelve disciples. Those who ministered to others received a blessing themselves. Jewish readers of Matthew’s Gospel would certainly have thought of the manna God provided for Israel when they were in the wilderness (Ex 16:1-31), as well as when Elisha fed a hundred men, and there was food left over (2 Ki 4:42-44). That this occasion was intended to be didactic for the disciples is made evident later when Jesus rebuked them for their lack of faith (Matt 16:5-12).

Matthew closes the pericope, saying, “There were about five thousand men who ate, besides women and children” (Matt 14:21). The number of the crowd could have been between 10,000 and 20,000 people. As God, Jesus could have snapped His fingers and immediately filled every belly with a meal to sustain them. But this would bypass the normal means by which a meal is received through the process of eating. Later, the multitudes sought after Jesus, not because they wanted His teaching, even though He offered it many times, but because He fed them free meals. Though the people were glad to receive the meal Jesus gave them, they would eventually reject Jesus Himself, who is “the Bread of Life” (John 6:35). How sad that people will choose the lesser and reject the greater.

After Jesus fed the masses, He sent the disciples away in a boat and then went up on a mountain by Himself to pray (Matt 14:22-23). The apostle John informs us that after Jesus fed the multitudes, the people were politically motivated to make Him king. John wrote, “when the people saw the sign which He had performed, they said, ‘This is truly the Prophet who is to come into the world.’ So Jesus, perceiving that they were intending to come and take Him by force to make Him king, withdrew again to the mountain by
Himself alone” (John 6:14-15). This crowd was persistent and pursued Jesus (John 6:22-25). But Jesus said to them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, you seek Me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate of the loaves and were filled” (John 6:26). The masses saw Jesus as the perfect social justice warrior who could give them free meals, free healthcare, and perhaps help them throw off the shackles of Roman tyranny. But the crowds who loved Jesus in the moment would later turn on Him and demand His crucifixion. John Walvoord comments:

Matthew does not mention what is recorded in John 6:14-15, that the multitudes, impressed with this tremendous miracle, not only recognized Christ as the predicted Prophet but wanted to take Him by force and make Him a king. The multitude reasoned that with such a miraculous king who could heal the sick, raise the dead, and multiply food, they had one who had sufficient power to give them victory over the oppression of Rome. Like Moses, who gave them manna from heaven and Elisha who miraculously fed a hundred men (2 Ki 4:42-44), Jesus seemed to be a great leader. This was not the way, however, in which the kingdom was to come, and their faith was a superficial confidence that came from having full stomachs. All too soon, some of them would be part of the mob crying, “Crucify him.”

Here’s an amazing thing. Jesus knew the people were flawed. He knew their motivation for coming to Him was to receive healing, free meals, and to witness a miracle. He also knew their corrupt political motivations for wanting to make Him king, and that when He refused, they would viciously turn on Him and demand He be crucified. Sinful people can be this way; for what they cannot control, they will sometimes try to cancel. Yet, knowing all this, Jesus still had compassion on them and ministered to them with food and healing, which was necessary for their betterment. Jesus loved them with eyes wide open. And He loved them because of who He is, and not because of any worthiness in them. Such should be the heart and mind of those who are God’s ministers. We are to love with eyes wide open, and with an open hand that gives freely for the benefit of others. For we have tasted of the grace and goodness of God, who loved us while we were helpless, ungodly, sinners, and enemies (Rom 5:6-10). And though being dead and trapped in our sins (Eph 2:1-2), God demonstrated “His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us” (Rom 5:8). May the love and grace we have come to know flow freely through us for the benefit of others.

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