

J. C. RYLE'S NOTES ON THE GOSPEL OF JOHN
6:1-14

1. After these things Jesus went over the sea of Galilee, which is *the sea* of Tiberias. 2. And a great multitude followed him, because they saw his miracles which he did on them that were diseased. 3. And Jesus went up into a mountain, and there he sat with his disciples. 4. And the passover, a feast of the Jews, was near. 5. Then Jesus lifted up *his* eyes and seeing a great multitude coming toward him, he said to Philip, Where shall we buy bread, that these may eat? 6. And this he said to prove him, for he himself knew what he would do. 7. Philip answered him, Two hundred pennyworth of bread is not sufficient for them, that every one of them may take a little. 8. One of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, said to him, 9. There is a lad here who has five barley loaves and two small fishes, but what are they among so many? 10. 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. 11. And Jesus took the loaves, and when he had given thanks he distributed *them* to the disciples, and the disciples to those sitting down; and likewise of the fishes, as much as they wanted. 12. When they were filled, he said to his disciples, Gather up the fragments that remain, that nothing be lost. 13. Therefore they gathered *them* together, and filled twelve baskets with the fragments of the five barley loaves which were left over by those who had eaten. 14. Then those men, when they had seen the miracle that Jesus did, said, This is truly that prophet who should come into the world.

1.--[*After these things.*] The remark made in chapter 5:1 applies here. The expression denotes an interval of time having elapsed between the end of the fifth chapter and the beginning of the sixth. John passes over all the events which happened at the conclusion of our Lord's defense of Himself at Jerusalem. In fact, if the feast spoken of at the beginning of the fifth chapter was really the passover, almost an entire year of our Lord's ministry is unnoticed by John.

The events in this chapter, we should remark, are the only events in our Lord's ministry in Galilee described by St. John, excepting the miracle of turning the water into wine at Cana and the healing of the ruler's son. (Chapters ii and iv.)

[*Went over the sea...Tiberias.*] This sea so-called was a fresh-water lake in Galilee through which the Jordan runs. According to Thomson, one of the most recent and accurate travelers in the Holy Land, it is about fourteen miles long, and nine wide at the widest part. It lies no less than six hundred feet below the level of the sea and is often agitated by sudden and violent storms.

Tiberias was a town on the west side of the lake, built by Herod about the

time of our Lord's birth and comparatively a modern place in our Lord's time. In the days of Josephus, forty years after our Lord's crucifixion, Tiberias had become an important city. It was spared by the Romans, when Vespasian's army destroyed almost every other city in Galilee, for its adherence to the Roman cause, and was made capital of the province.

John is the only Gospel-writer who calls the lake the "sea of Tiberias." His doing so is an incidental confirmation of the opinion that he wrote much later than Matthew, Mark, and Luke, and after the taking of Jerusalem. He naturally used the name by which the lake was best known when he wrote, and most familiar to the Gentile readers whom he had especially in view.

The reason of our Lord going over the sea would appear to be His desire to withdraw Himself from public notice (Mark vi.31.), and perhaps from the persecution of Herod's party after the death of John the Baptist. Comparing John's account with that of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, it seems most likely that he "went over the sea" from the west coast and landed on the northeast side of the lake not far from Bethsaida. Luke tells us distinctly that the miracle which John here records was wrought in "a desert place belonging to the city called Bethsaida." (Luke ix.10.) Add to this the fact that no less than three of our Lord's disciples were inhabitants of Bethsaida, viz., Philip, Andrew, and Peter, and our Lord's retirement to this neighborhood seems natural and reasonable. The notion held by many that there were two Bethsaidas, one in Galilee where Andrew, Peter, and Philip lived, and one in Gaulanitis where this miracle of feeding the multitude was wrought, seems both groundless and needless. Bethsaida was at the head of the lake, in Galilee, near the point where the river Jordan entered the lake, and the district belonging to it extended most probably beyond the river into Gaulanitis. Thomson shows this satisfactorily.

2.--[*A great multitude followed...diseased.*] There seems no reason to suppose that this multitude followed our Lord from any but low motives. They "saw His miracles;" that was all. Some few, perhaps, were in doubt and suspense, wondering whether He who wrought such miracles could possibly be the Messiah. The great majority probably "followed" from that vague idle curiosity and love of excitement which are the principles that gather nearly every crowd in the world.

St. Mark says that "the people saw them departing, and many knew Him and ran afoot thither out of all cities and outwent them and came together unto Him." (Mark vi.33.) This they might easily do by going round the head of the lake to the point where Bethsaida was.

3.--[*Jesus went up into a mountain.*] The Greek here would be more correctly rendered "into *the* mountain." Whether there is any special reason for this we cannot tell. It may be the one mountain which stood there in contradistinction to the more level ground composing the district. Thomson, the American traveler, expressly says that there is a "bold headland" here with "a smooth grassy spot" at the base, "capable of seating many thousand people." It may possibly be "that particular hill" to which our Lord was in the habit of going when He visited the district near Bethsaida. It may be "the hill country" generally, or mountainous district

near Bethsaida.

[*His disciples.*] This expression includes not only the twelve who had been chosen and set apart by our Lord by this time, but many others who professed themselves His disciples. Many of them, it would appear from this very chapter (verse 66), were not really believers, and in course of time fell away. If Christ Himself had many such disciples and followers, ministers now-a-days (even the very best) must not be surprised to find the same state of things among their people.

4.--[*The passover...was near.*] John's habit of explaining Jewish customs for the benefit of Gentile readers should here be noticed.

The approach of the passover feast is no doubt specially mentioned in order to show the suitability of our Lord's discourse in this chapter to the season of the year. The minds of His hearers would doubtless be thinking of the passover lamb and its flesh about to be eaten and blood about to be sprinkled. Our Lord takes occasion to speak of that "flesh and blood" which must be eaten and drunk by all who would not perish in sin. It is an instance of that divine wisdom with which our master spoke "words in season" and turned everything to account.

Let it be noted that our Lord did not keep this passover in Jerusalem to all appearance but remained in Galilee. Yet He generally observed all the ordinances of the law of Moses most strictly and "fulfilled all righteousness." The reason evidently is, as Rollock remarks, that the enmity and persecution of the leading Jews at Jerusalem made it impossible for Him to go there. It would have cut short His ministry and brought on His death before the time. May we not also learn here that the use of outward ordinances and ceremonies is not so absolutely necessary that they can never be dispensed with? Grace, repentance, and faith are absolutely needful to salvation; sacraments and ordinances are not.

The near approach of the passover may possibly account in part for the crowds who were assembled on this occasion. Not a few of the people, perhaps, were on their way to Jerusalem to keep the passover feast and were drawn out of their road by hearing of our Lord's miracles.

5.--[*Then Jesus...eyes...multitude.*] We must not conclude from these expressions that our Lord was suddenly surprised by the appearance of a great crowd. On the contrary, Matthew and Mark both tell us that before He wrought the miracle of which we are about to read, He had felt compassion for the multitude because they were "as sheep not having a shepherd," and had "taught them many things." (Mark. vi.34.) When this teaching was over, He seems to have taken a survey of the crowd before Him, and seeing how large it was proceeded to show His tender concern for the needs of men's bodies as well as of their souls. A great crowd is always an impressive and solemn sight. It is an interesting thought that the same eyes which looked compassionately on this crowd are still looking at every crowd, and especially at every crowd of persons assembled in God's name.

[*He said to Philip...eat?*] Our Lord's reason for asking this question is given in the next verse. But it is worth notice that there was a certain

propriety in asking Philip this question because Philip "was of Bethsaida," the very town near which they were all assembled. (John 1.44.) Our Lord, therefore, might reasonably appeal to Philip as one most likely and able to answer His question, whether it were possible to buy bread for such a multitude. He would, of course, know the capabilities of the neighborhood. The idea, maintained by Chrysostom, Burgon, and others, that Philip was a disciple peculiarly slow to recognize Christ's godhead and therefore requiring special appeals, seems to be a far less satisfactory solution.

6.--[*This He said to prove him.*] We find the same kind of procedure on other occasions. When our Lord appeared to the two disciples at Emmaus, we read that after His discourse with them, "He made as though He would have gone further." (Luke xxiv.28.) This was "to prove" whether they really wished for more of His company. When on another occasion He came to the disciples walking on the sea, St. Mark says, "He would have passed by them." (Mark vi.48.) When in this very chapter He would draw forth an expression of faith from His disciples, He says, "Will ye also go away?" (John vi.67.) Our Lord knows the sluggishness and coldness of our hearts, and He sees it good to stir our spiritual senses and draw forth our spiritual desire by such a mode of dealing with us.

Explanatory observations like this, made by the Gospel writer himself, are more frequent in St. John's Gospel than in any of the other three.

[*He himself knew...do.*] This would be rendered more literally "what he was about to do." Our Lord's foreknowledge of the miracle He was about to do should be noted. The words He used in the last chapter should be remembered. They were not works which were done by chance and accidentally, in consequence of unforeseen circumstances, but foreseen and predetermined. They were "the works which the Father had given Him to finish." (John v.36.)

7.--[*Philip answered...not sufficient, etc.*] What quantity of bread this sum would have procured we have no accurate means of knowing. But we may remember that the Roman "denarius," or penny, represented a very much larger sum than a penny does among ourselves. We must remember also that bread was much cheaper then than it is now. The quantity Philip named was probably much larger than we suppose.

Burgon thinks that the sum named by Philip was the whole "store of money contained in their common purse," viz., about six or seven pounds. But this cannot be proved.

8.--[*One of His disciples, Andrew, etc.*] Let it be noted here that Andrew, as well as Philip, was a native of the district of Bethsaida where all these things happened. There is a propriety, therefore, in his speaking and giving information on the present occasion.

9.--[*There is a lad...fishes.*] We should note in this verse how small were the provisions which our Lord miraculously multiplied. The fact that one "little boy" (for this is the meaning of the word we render "lad") could carry all the supply that Andrew mentions is a plain proof that the "loaves" could not have been large nor the "fish" of great size.

The "fishes" were probably small dried fish such as are not uncommonly used as food now in hot countries, and, near the sea of Galilee would be, of course, common.

Barley was regarded, according to the Talmud, as a coarse food only fit for horses and asses.

[*What are they among so many?*] This expression of Andrew's is purposely reported, no doubt, in order to show how strong was the conviction of our Lord's disciples that they had not sufficient provision to feed the multitude, and then to bring out into clear light the greatness of the miracle which our Lord wrought. It also helps to prove that the wonderful feeding of the multitude was not a preconcerted and prepared thing arranged by our Lord and His disciples. Even His own immediate followers were taken by surprise.

10.--[*Jesus said, Make the men sit down.*] This arrangement prevented confusion and preserved order--points of vast importance when any large assembly of people is gathered together. Moreover, it made less easy to practice any imposition or deceit in the feeding of the multitude. When every man was sitting steadily in his appointed place, no one could be passed over in the distribution of food without it being observed. St. Mark tell us that they "sat down in ranks, by hundreds and by fifties." (Mark vi.40.)

[*There was much grass in the place.*] The time of the year when these things happened would be the very time when there was the most "grass." It was in the springtime, just before the passover, when the winter was gone and the parching heat of summer had not begun. Thomson, the American traveler, reports that at this very day there is an open space of green grass at the foot of a hill at the very place where, in all probability, this miracle took place.

Let us note our Lord's consideration for the bodily comfort of His followers. He chooses a place where there was "much grass" to sit down on.

[*So the men sat down...five thousand.*] The word "men" here is probably emphatic, in contradistinction to the "women and children," whom Matthew expressly mentions as having been present beside the five thousand men. In the Greek the word is not the same as that rendered "men" in the first clause of this verse.

11.--[*Jesus took the loaves...given thanks.*] The expression here seems rather to imply a solemn action of prayer and blessing, as well as of giving thanks, as the first preliminary to the mighty miracle about to follow. In fact, St. Luke says, "He took the five loaves and the two fishes, and looking up to heaven He blessed them, and brake, and gave," etc. (Luke ix.16.) This also seems implied in St. John's subsequent reference to this miracle where He speaks of "the place where they did eat bread after that the Lord had given thanks." (John vi.23.) The Greek word here used is precisely the same that is used in the account of the institution of the Lord's Supper given by St. Matthew, St. Mark, St. Luke,

and St. Paul. St. Matthew and St. Mark say that our Lord "gave thanks" when He took "the cup." St. Luke and St. Paul say that He also did it when He took "the bread." So here we can hardly doubt that blessing and giving thanks went together. The Greek word is the one which we have borrowed and transferred to our own language in the expression "Eucharist."

[*He distributed to the disciples, etc.*] I think there can be no doubt that this was the point at which the mighty miracle here wrought by our Lord came in. As fast as He broke the loaves and the disciples carried them away to distribute them, so fast did the loaves multiply under His hands. It was in the act of breaking and distributing to the disciples that the miraculous multiplication took place. In fact, there was a continual act of creation going on. Bread was continually called into existence which did not exist before. The greatness of this miracle is perhaps not sufficiently realized. One loaf and less than half a fish to every thousand men! It is evident there could not have been more than a small morsel for each one without a miraculous increase of the food.

Bishop Hall remarks: "He could as well have multiplied the loaves whole. Why would He rather do it in the breaking? Was it not to teach us that in the distribution of our goods we should expect His blessing, not in their entireness and reservation? There is [he] who scatters and yet increases."

12.--[*When they were filled.*] That expression deserves notice. It is one of the strongest proofs of the reality of the miracle we are reading. It would be impossible to convince five thousand hungry men in a wilderness that they were really filled if they were not. A few enthusiasts and fanatics might possibly have been found who might have fancied they had eaten when they had not. But it is absurd to suppose that so strong a bodily sensation as hunger could possibly be relieved in five thousand men if there had not been a real supply of food and real eating of it.

[*He said...Gather up, etc.*] In this little circumstance, again, we have a proof that real food was supplied and in sufficient quantity for all. There was not merely a morsel for each man but an abundant supply, enough and to spare. Our Lord's care for little things and dislike of waste and extravagance appear strong in this sentence. It would be well if the principle contained in the words was more remembered by Christians: "Let nothing be lost." It is a deep principle of very wide application. Time, money, and opportunities of showing kindness and doing good are specially to be remembered in applying this principle.

It admits of question whether the "disciples" who distributed the bread on this occasion, and afterwards gathered the fragments, did not include other helpers beside the twelve apostles. The time necessary for the distribution of bread among five thousand people, if only twelve pairs of hands were employed, would prove on calculation to be very great.

13.--[*Therefore...filled twelve baskets, etc.*] This simple fact is enough to prove that a mighty miracle had been wrought. Our common sense can tell us that five loaves and two fishes alone could not have filled a single basket. Now, if the fragments left after the meal were enough to fill "twelve baskets," there must evidently have been a miraculous

multiplication of the food at some stage of the proceedings. The fragments alone were probably fifty times more bulky than the original supply of food with which the meal began. The identity between the number of the baskets filled and the number of the apostles will, of course, strike any reader. One might think that each apostle had a basket.

St. Mark mentions that there were fragments of "fishes" put into the baskets as well as loaves, so that the fishes also were miraculously multiplied as well as the bread.

Some early writers, not without justice, call this the greatest miracle that our Lord ever wrought. Perhaps we are poor judges of such points and little able to make comparisons. But it is certain that on no other occasion did our Lord manifest so clearly His creative power. No doubt it was as easy for Him to cause bread to be as to say "Let there be light," or to make the earth bring forth herbs and corn at the creation of the world. But the miracle was clearly intended to be one which Christians should hold in special remembrance. It is, at any rate, noteworthy that this is the only passage in Christ's life which all the four Gospel writers alike record. In this respect the miracle stands alone.

The attempts of Neologians to explain away this miracle are simply contemptible and ridiculous. It requires more faith to believe their explanations than to believe the miracle and take it as we find it. None but a person *determined* to disbelieve all miracles and cast them out of the sacred narrative would every try to make out (as some actually have tried) that the four times-repeated story of the miraculous feeding, which we have considered, only meant that the multitude brought out the hidden stores of provisions which they had carried with them and shared them with one another!

14.--[*Then those men.*] This probably means the whole crowd and multitude who had been fed on this occasion.

[*When they had seen the miracle.*] Signs and wonders were expected to accompany the appearance of any prophet or messenger from God. Here was a mighty miracle, and at once the minds of all who saw it were excited.

[*This is truly that prophet, etc.*] This meant, that "prophet like unto Moses," whom all well-instructed Jews expected to appear, and for whose speedy appearing the ministry of John the Baptist had prepared the minds of all the dwellers in Palestine.

"Truly", *i.e.*, really and indeed.

"That prophet" would be more literally "the prophet."