

I Flunked Faith 101

Wonder-Working Power – Part VI

John 6:1-21

Introduction

In John's gospel, chapter 6, we have the testing of the disciples' faith. It is tested to the very limit, and all of the disciples fail the test of faith.

Faith . . .

And a Brown Bag Lunch

Turn to John, chapter 6, verse 1.

After these things Jesus went away to the other side of the Sea of Galilee (or Tiberias).

Stop here. Mark's gospel informs us, in chapter 6, verses 31 through 33, that Jesus actually told his disciples to,

. . . "Come away by yourselves to a lonely place and rest a while." (For there were many people coming and going, and they did not even have time to eat.) And they went away in the boat to a lonely place by themselves. And the people saw them going, and many recognized them, and they ran there together on foot from all the cities, and got there ahead of them.

Imagine that! They are going away for a quiet time of rest and relaxation, but the crowd sees the direction the boat is sailing and runs around the shore line, about nine miles, and actually beats the disciples to their place of retreat.

Two Different Reactions

Now, Matthew tells us, in chapter 14, verse 15, that the disciples wanted to send the crowd away. Jesus, however, responded differently. They had two different reactions to the same situation.

The reaction of the disciples was irritation

1. The reaction of the disciples was irritation.

Imagine that your vacation is interrupted by 20,000 people pressing you on every side. You might say, "Lord, send them away. I just want to be left to myself for a little while, without any interruptions."

The reaction of Jesus was compassion

2. The reaction of Jesus was compassion.

Here is this massive mob of about 20,000 people. Verse 5a of John, chapter 6, says,

Jesus therefore lifting up His eyes, and seeing that a great multitude was coming to Him . . .

Now, Mark's gospel, in chapter 6, verse 34, fills in the gap by adding,

. . . and He felt compassion for them because they were like sheep without a shepherd

What are sheep like, without a shepherd?

They are:

- leaderless,
- defenseless,
- hungry,

- wandering about and lost.

Two Different Perspectives

So, now, we have two different perspectives.

Jesus saw an illustration

1. Jesus saw an illustration.

This would be a wonderful time to teach that He is the bread of life; that He is the eternal food that produces everlasting life. We are going to look at that illustration in detail in another session.

The disciples saw an interruption

2. The disciples, however, saw an interruption.

Serving people is rarely convenient. It is most often spontaneous.

A lady in our church recently had such an “interruption”. She was visited by an unsaved friend, who said, “You know, my life just hasn’t turned out the way I wanted.”

“Boom!” There it was – an opportunity. “Do I really want to hear her frustrations? Do I really want to be brought into her pain?”

This woman did – and she listened.

One of the marks of maturing disciples is that they are able to see illustrations, instead of interruptions, and reveal compassion, instead of irritation.

Now look at the rest of verse 5 and verse 6.

Jesus therefore lifting up His eyes, and seeing that a great multitude was coming to Him, said to Philip, “Where are we to buy bread, that these may eat?” And this He was saying to test him; . . .

(This is a pop quiz!)

. . . for He himself knew what He was intending to do.

Why ask Philip? Because he was the disciple that came from this region and he knew where the bakery was! He knew where the flour was stored; he knew the resources of the closest village.

Jesus is asking the expert in physical facts, “Is it physically possible to find the food to feed these people?”

So, Philip gets out his calculator and pencil, “Let’s see, 20,000 people will eat so much bread . . . that costs so much . . .”

His answer is in verse 7, and paraphrased, he says, “Oh, Lord, we’d need two hundred denarii just to give everyone a little bite!”

How much is that? Well, one denari was a day’s wage. If you multiply 200 days by the minimum hourly income of contemporary society, you are looking at 7,600 dollars just to buy enough to give everyone a little bite. It is absolutely inconceivable!

Now, about that time, Andrew shows up. Look at verses 8 and 9.

One of His disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter’s brother, said to Him, “There is a lad here who has five barley loaves and two fish, but what are these for so many people?”

Now, get this picture – Andrew arrives, out of breath, having “scoped out” the crowd. He has discovered a little boy with a lunch of five barley loaves and two fish.

Barley loaves, by the way, were the bread of the poor person. Barley bread was rough and coarse. These loaves were flat, pancake-like bread, baked in round, small pieces that were about the size of a silver dollar.

And what about the two fish? These were opsaria and were the size of small sardines. Fresh fish was an unheard of luxury, since there was no means of transporting or refrigerating it. So, these small sardine-like opsaria were caught and pickled. They served something like a small, but tasty, relish. So, this little boy had his little pickled fish to help the dry barley bread go down.

Here comes Andrew with the boy. Perhaps, in his mind, he is thinking of the possibility of some miracle? He comes up to the other disciples and to the Lord, and says, “Hey, I’ve got this boy with his lunch.”

And the other disciples bend over in hilarious laughter. That is in-between the lines. It strikes me as funny, though, that Andrew suggests something and then, adds, in verse 9b,

. . . but what are these for so many people?

“Silly me!!”

Two Different Faiths

So, in this story, we have two different faiths. They both fail to reach their conclusion in the power of Christ, however.

Philip – faith that was obscured by physical circumstances

1. First, Philip had faith that was obscured by physical circumstances.

The circumstances were – not enough money, nowhere to buy bread . . . so send them away.

Andrew – faith that was threatened by the physical magnitude.

2. Secondly, Andrew had faith that was threatened by the physical magnitude.

We would have to add that the rest of the disciples agreed.

If you combine all four gospel accounts, you come up with five terrific obstacles to Christ's miracle:

- Luke, chapter 9, verse 12b – This is not the right place – “. . . for here we are in a desolate place.”
- Luke, chapter 9, verse 13b – There is not enough bread – “. . . We have no more than five loaves and two fish . . .”
- John, chapter 6, verse 7b – There is not enough money – “. . . two hundred denarii worth of bread is not sufficient . . .”
- Matthew, chapter 14, verse 15b – There is not enough manpower – “. . . send the multitude away, that they may go into the villages and buy food for themselves.”
- Mark, chapter 6, verse 35b – There is not enough time – “. . . it is already quite late”.

The opinion among the twelve disciples was unanimous – the situation was impossible, so send them away! Not one of them stopped to think, “Maybe Jesus could do something miraculous. Why, He had turned ordinary water into wine.”

Now, admit something – we are probably thinking, “How ridiculous! If I had been there, I would have immediately thought to ask Jesus to feed the crowd. How obvious! I mean, what could a little food problem be to the One who has raised the dead, cast out demons, healed every sort of disease, and turned water into wine? Okay, Lord, show ‘em!”

Well, how then, are you handling your problems today?! Are you acting as if God is not big enough for your situation right now?!

This is getting a little too convicting, so let us move on! Jesus responds in verses 10 and 11.

Jesus said, “Have the people sit down.” Now there was much grass in the place. So the men sat down, in number about five thousand. Jesus therefore took the loaves; and having given thanks, He distributed to those who were seated; likewise also of the fish as much as they wanted.

What an incredible miracle! Jesus just kept breaking those two pickled fish, and He created the substance as He broke it. He took the bread and created bread as He broke it.

Now the liberals have a problem with this, so they have come up with a couple of suggestions to explain away the miracle.

- The first explanation is that what Jesus was doing was passing out communion, so everyone just got a crumb of bread and a teensy weensy bit of pickled fish.

Look at verse 11, the last phrase,

[they took] . . . as much as they wanted . . .

Matthew, chapter 14, verse 20a, tells us that they ate until they all, “. . . were satisfied.”

The Greek word “chortazo,” or “satisfied,” could be translated “stuffed”.

- The second suggestion is that this little boy so humbled the people with his graciousness that everyone pulled out their own lunches and shared with each other what they had brought along.

Well, look at the result of this feeding, in verses 13 through 15.

And so they gathered them up, and filled twelve baskets with fragments from the five barley loaves, which were left over by those who had eaten. When therefore the people saw the sign which He had performed, they said, “This is of a truth the Prophet who is to come into the world.” Jesus therefore perceiving that they were intending to come and take Him by force, to make Him king, withdrew again to the mountain by Himself alone.

Why the big deal, if all that happened was that everyone shared their lunches with each other? What kind of sign is that?

I will tell you, the rabbis of Jesus' day were teaching, based on an obscure text in the Pentateuch, that, when the Messiah came, He would reproduce the miracle of the wilderness – that is, the miracle of the manna from heaven. So, here is Jesus, feeding the multitude in a grassy wilderness, reproducing the miracle of the manna in His own hands.

Application

Well, what did the disciples learn from failing to look to Christ for the solution?

Lessons Learned From Failing

Let me give you two lessons learned from failing.

Our resource for ministry is in Christ, not ourselves

1. One lesson is that our resource for ministry is in Christ, not ourselves.

You might say, "I don't have much to offer Him."

"Well, what do you have?"

"A couple of sardines, some barley bread . . ."

Paul explained, in II Corinthians, chapter 4, verse 7,

But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the surpassing greatness of the power may be of God and not from ourselves

God uses common earthen vessels, like us, so that there will be no mistake as to where the power comes from. We, so often, think that God wants and needs our strengths – and He does use them, when they are committed to Him – but what about our barley loaves, our ordinariness, our weaknesses?

The truth is, these are harder to give to God! If you are eloquent, it is easy to say, "God, here is my eloquence. Take and use it."

If you are a good business person, it is simple to say, "God, you can have my administrative ability."

But, it is another thing entirely to give God your weaknesses.

Elisabeth Elliot wrote, "If the only thing you have to offer God is a broken heart, then offer him your broken heart."

God can use that too!

That leads me to the second lesson.

Our effectiveness in ministry is through cooperative effort, not singular

2. The second lesson is that our effectiveness in ministry is through cooperative effort, not singular.

Have you ever considered that the miracle of this day involved two things?

- It took the power of Christ to create the bread, and
- It took the willingness of the disciples to distribute the bread.

It was Christ who provided the meal – the disciples merely passed it out.

He could have created a meal in front of each person. But, He took the food He was given, and produced, miraculously, more bread and then, used the disciples to hand it out.

Example of one who failed

This episode is immediately followed by a swim in the lake – at least for one disciple.

To get the amplified gospel account, turn back to Matthew, chapter 14, verses 22 through 24.

And immediately He made the disciples get into the boat, and go ahead of Him to the other side, while He sent the multitudes away. And after He had sent the multitudes away, He went up to the mountain by Himself to pray; and when it was evening, He was there alone. But the boat was already many stadia . . .

(or furlongs – one-eighth of a mile)

. . . away from the land, battered by the waves; for the wind was contrary.

Mark's gospel says, in chapter 6, verse 48, that they were "straining at the oars," or literally, "They were terrified in their rowing."

Continue in Matthew, chapter 14, to verses 25 through 33.

And in the fourth watch of the night . . .

(or 4 a.m.)

. . . He came to them, walking on the sea. And when the disciples saw Him walking on the sea, they were frightened, saying, "It is a ghost!" And they cried out for fear. But immediately Jesus spoke to them, saying, "Take courage, it is I; do not be afraid." And Peter answered Him and said, "Lord, if it is You, command me to come to You on the water." And He said, "Come!". And Peter got out of the boat, and walked on the water and came toward Jesus. But seeing the wind, he became afraid, and beginning to sink, he cried out saying, "Lord, save me!" And immediately Jesus stretched out His hand and took hold of him, and said to him, "O you of little faith, why did you doubt?" And when they got into the boat, the wind stopped. And those who were in the boat worshiped Him, saying, "You are certainly God's Son!"

Peter failed to follow through in faith with what he began by faith!

Allow me to point out several things about Peter's failure. But let me say first, while we will look at Peter's failure, let us not forget that he was the only disciple who got out of the boat. The others were hanging on for dear life.

Peter Failed The Test

Peter failed the test in several areas.

In familiar territory

1. First, Peter failed the test in familiar territory.

Peter knew the Sea of Galilee; he knew water. The Lord took him to the place where he, as a fisherman and a sailor, had the greatest confidence!

Sometimes our biggest failures occur in areas where we just knew we had it all together.

After extensive training

2. Secondly, Peter failed the test after extensive training.

For two years, Peter has been trained by the Master.

You can never say, "I've conquered the Christian life. I've mastered the ministry. I can give out the four spiritual laws in my sleep . . ."

In the process of obeying God's will

3. Thirdly, Peter failed the test in the process of obeying God's will.

What an interesting place to fail the Lord.

Here he is, and we are, right in the middle of God's will and suddenly, he is filled with pride, envy, and fear.

Lessons Learned From This Failure

Let me give you a couple of lessons to be learned from this failure.

Obedience to Christ does not remove the obstacles

1. The first lesson is that obedience to Christ does not remove the obstacles.

I happen to believe, that storm and that three quarters of an hour period of terrified rowing were the necessary preparation so the men would be forever impacted by the sight of Jesus walking on top of the raging waters. I do not believe the calm of the storm was as great a lesson to the men as the sight of Jesus walking on top of the crashing breakers.

Why? Well, that which they struggled in fear against, was that over which Jesus Christ had perfect control.

What a lesson! God does not guarantee the absence of storms; He does guarantee His presence in them, and He does reveal, if we will, by faith, look to Him, that He is in perfect control, that the storms are no match for His divine power.

Deep waters are not intended to drown us but develop us

2. A second lesson from this failure is that deep waters are not intended to drown us, but to develop us.

Jesus Christ wants to develop your faith and He does not develop it in the normal situations of life, but in the interruptions; not when things are settled, but when things are stormy.

Has it ever occurred to you that the creator of your storm could be God? He created it so that He could reveal His power in and over the storm.

Here you are, facing some difficulty. Are you looking everywhere but up? The good news is that God does not send the angels down with baseball bats to hit you over the head, and say, "Sorry, you just flunked Faith 101. God is kicking you out of the class; you're off the team."

You see, it is possible to fail without becoming a failure!

The question is, are you willing to be developed as a disciple, or are you constantly asking the Lord to get rid of the inconveniences, the storms, the hurdles of life?

A young black girl lived in the poverty section of Philadelphia. One of her most enjoyable activities was singing in her Union Baptist church choir. The adults noticed latent talent in her voice and so, they began a fund. It was called, "The Fund For Marian Anderson's Future". They raised one hundred twenty-six dollars, in pennies, nickels, and dimes, and she began taking singing lessons.

When she was eighteen, she had an audition with a very famous instructor, but she was rejected. Those who believed in her planned a concert in the town hall in New York City, but the critics tore her up. While she was well received on a European concert tour, because of her race, she was not allowed to sing in Constitution Hall in Washington, D.C.

For many years, Marian Anderson wallowed in self pity. Her mother finally came to her and said, "Marian, I want you to think about your troubles and your failures a little and pray a lot."

Then, her mother said something that Marian never forgot, she said, "Marian, you must learn that grace comes before greatness."

Listen to an older apostle Peter, the one who failed an awful lot, write, in I Peter, chapter 5, verse 6,

Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you at the proper time"

In other words, "when He is ready".

Peter is saying that humility comes before honor; grace comes before greatness. How do you learn grace? The same way you develop faith – by the storms and the famines of life.

Marian Anderson went on to become a well known singer. She was once asked by a reporter,

"Marian, what was the most incredible experience of your career?"

She had a lot of possible choices – private concerts for the King and Queen of England and for the Eisenhowers; being awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom; being appointed as a delegate to the United Nations. But, what was her answer? She replied, "The day I went home and told my mother she wouldn't have to take in washing anymore."

"Hey, Peter, what's your greatest moment?"

What a selection he could have had – walking on the water, healing the sick, preaching the very first sermon and seeing three thousand people come to faith in Christ. The very last recorded words of Peter, however, point elsewhere. Look at II Peter, chapter 3, verse 17 and 18.

You therefore, beloved, knowing this beforehand, be on your guard lest . . . you fall from your own steadfastness, . . .

In other words, "Keep at it; continue to pursue the Lord's instruction. You might flunk a test, but stay in class."

. . . but grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To Him be the glory, both now and to the day of eternity. Amen.

"The greatest thing in my life," Peter says, "was to get back in the boat – to faithfully follow, through repeated failures, so that, ultimately, Jesus Christ would receive the glory and honor due unto Him!"

Grace comes before greatness . . . humility comes before honor. Learning to fail, yet following on, comes as we learn to live the life of faith.

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 1/30/1994 by Stephen Davey.

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