

# The Galilean Crisis

## *Section 1 - The Miracle*

***John 6:1-15; Matt. 14:13-21; Mark 6:33-44; Luke 9:11-17***

The sixth chapter of John's Gospel is full of wonders. It tells us about a great miracle, a great enthusiasm, a great storm, a great sermon, a great apostasy, and a great trial of faith and faithfulness that the Twelve experienced. It contains the abridged history of an important crisis in the ministry of Jesus and in the religious experience of His disciples. In many respects, it was a crisis which foreshadowed the great final one which happened a little more than a year later (John 6:4). Then, a more famous miracle was performed and was followed by even greater popularity. This was succeeded by a more complete desertion and ended in the crucifixion by which the riddle of the message at Capernaum was solved, and its prophecy fulfilled.

The facts recorded by John in this chapter of his Gospel can be understood under four headings: 1) the miracle in the wilderness, 2) the storm on the Sea of Galilee, 3) the sermon in the synagogue, and 4) the subsequent sifting of Christ's disciples. We will consider these in four separate sections.

### *The Miracle in the Wilderness*

The miracle occurred on the eastern shore of the Sea of Galilee. Luke gives the precise location: in the neighborhood of a city called Bethsaida (Lk. 9:10). This, of course, could not be the Bethsaida on the western shore, the home of Andrew and Peter. There seems to be another city by the same name on the north-eastern side of the sea. To distinguish it from the other city, it was called Bethsaida Julias [named after the daughter of Augustus]. An eye-witness (Stanley, *Sinai and Palestine*) informs us that the site of the city "is discernable on the lower slope of the hill which overhangs the rich plain at the mouth of the Jordan" (that is, at the place where the waters of the Upper Jordan flow into the Sea of Galilee). The same author proves the suitability of the location for the miracle when he says, "The desert place was either the green tableland which lies halfway up the hill immediately above Bethsaida, or else in the parts of the plain not cultivated by the hand of man would be found the 'much green grass,' still fresh in the spring of the year when this event occurred, before it had faded away in the summer sun: the tall grass which, broken down by the feet of the thousands then gathered together, would make as it were, 'couches' for them to recline upon" (cf. Lk. 9:10; Mk. 6:39; John 6:10).

Jesus and the Twelve retired to this place after the latter had returned from their mission. Here they sought rest and privacy, but they did not find it. Their every move was being watched, and the people flocked along the shore toward the place where they had sailed. They ran all the way, as if they were afraid the disciples might escape, and arrived at the landing before the boat did (Mark 6:33). The crowd that gathered around Jesus was very large. All the Gospel writers agree in stating that there were five thousand present. And since the people were organized in groups of fifties and hundreds at the miraculous feeding, it was easy to count them (Mk. 6:40). So we do not have to accept this number as a rough estimate, but as a tolerably exact calculation.

Such a large multitude proves that the people who were living by the shore of the Sea of Galilee were extremely excited. These people possessed a passionate enthusiasm, a hero-worship, for Jesus. Jesus was the idol of the hour. They could not stand for Him to be absent; they could not see enough of His work, nor hear enough of His teaching. We may attribute this Galilean enthusiasm to the results of Christ's own past work as well as to the evangelistic mission which we studied in the last chapter. This exuberance seems to have spread as far south as Tiberias, because John reports that boats came from that city "to the place where they ate the bread" (John 6:23). Those who were in these boats came too late to witness the miracle or take part in the feast. However, this does not prove that their desire was not the same as the rest of the people. They lived further away from the scene of the miracle, it would take longer for the news to reach them, and it would take them longer to travel there.

The great miracle that was performed in the neighborhood of Bethsaida Julias was this: A vast assembly of human beings were fed with the totally inadequate means of "five barley loaves, and two fish" (John 6:9). It was truly an astounding work. We cannot comprehend it. But no event in the Gospel history has more witnesses to state that it really happened. All the evangelists tell about the miracle with precision and with very little apparent discrepancy. There is so much graphic detail that only eye-witnesses could have provided it. Even John, who records only a few of Christ's miracles, describes this one as carefully as any of his fellow evangelists. The only difference is that he introduces it into his narrative simply as a preface to the sermon on the Bread of Life, which is found only in his Gospel.

This wonderful miracle, exceptionally verified, seems open to objection on another front. It appears to be a miracle that was performed without sufficient reason. It cannot be demonstrated that it was urgently called for because of the needs of the multitude. Without a doubt, they were hungry and had not brought food with them. But the miracle was performed in the afternoon of the day on which they left their homes. Most of them could have returned within a few hours. It is true that it would have been somewhat difficult to have undertaken such a trip at the end of the day without food. But if it had been necessary, the hardship was far within the limits of

human endurance. It was just not necessary, for food could have been obtained on the way back in the neighboring towns and villages without their going very far. So if they had been dismissed just as they were, it would not have been a great inconvenience to them. This is apparent from the fact that the disciples made the suggestion that the multitude be sent away. We read: "And the day began to decline, and the Twelve came and said to Him, 'Send the multitude away, that they may go into the surrounding villages and countryside and find lodging and get something to eat'" (Luke 9:12). There is an obvious difference between the first miraculous feeding and the second, which occurred at a later period on the south-eastern side of the Sea. On that occasion, the people who had assembled around Jesus had been in the wilderness for three days without anything to eat, and there was no place to get food. So this miracle was demanded out of consideration for humanity (Mark 8:3-4). As we would expect, we find that compassion is given as the motive for that miracle: "He (Jesus) summoned His disciples and said to them, 'I feel compassion for the multitude because they have remained with Me now three days, and have nothing to eat; and if I send them away fasting to their home, they will faint on the way; and some of them have come from a distance'" (Mark 8:1-3).

### *A Critical Miracle*

Our purpose is not simply to get rid of the difficulty of assigning a sufficient motive for the first great miracle of feeding. If it was, we might be content to say that Jesus did not need an urgent situation to compel Him to use His power for the benefit of others. He would not use it for His own benefit, even in a case of extreme need, not even after a forty-day fast. But when the well-being of others was concerned, He passed out miraculous blessings with a liberal hand. He did not ask Himself, "Is this a serious enough occasion for Me to use My divine power? Is this man sick enough to justify a miracle and interfere with the laws of nature by healing him? Are the people who have assembled here hungry enough to be fed, like their fathers in the wilderness, with bread from heaven?" We believe that something higher than the satisfaction of their physical appetites was the goal of this miracle. It was a symbolic, didactic, *critical* miracle. It was meant to teach, yet also to test. It was meant to provide a text for the subsequent sermon and a standard by which the character of those who followed Jesus with such enthusiasm could be tested. The miraculous feast in the wilderness was intended to say to the multitude just what our sacramental feast says to us: "I, Jesus the Son of God Incarnate, am the bread of life. What this bread is to your bodies, I myself am to your souls." And the communicants who partook in that feast were to be tested by what they thought of the transaction. Those who were spiritual would see in it a sign of Christ's divine dignity and a seal of His saving grace. The carnal would be content with the fact that they had eaten the loaves and were filled. They would seize the opportunity, after what had just happened, to indulge in high hopes that they could have temporal gratification under the benevolent reign of the Prophet and King who had made His appearance among them.

### *Mercy and Judgment*

From this perspective, the miracle in the desert was not simply an act of mercy, but an act of judgment. Jesus mercifully fed the hungry multitude in order that He might sift it and separate the true disciples from the false. There was a greater demand for this sifting than for their physical cravings to be satisfied with food. If those thousands of people were all genuine disciples - great! But if not - if the larger number of them were following Christ because they misunderstood Him - then the sooner they became aware of it, the better. If Christ had allowed this large multitude to follow Him any longer without sifting, He would have been encouraging false hopes. He would have also misled the people as to the nature of His kingdom and His earthly mission. Therefore, He could not have devised a better method of separating the chaff from the wheat in that large company of professing disciples. First, He performed a miracle which would bring to the surface the hidden carnality of the largest number of people. Then He preached a sermon which could not fail to be offensive to their carnal minds.

The miraculous method that Jesus chose for confronting the difficulty that had arisen was not just hinted at in the Gospel narratives. For example, consider John's note about the time: "Now the Passover, the feast of the Jews, was at hand" (John 6:4). Is this simply a chronological statement? We do not think so. Then what further purpose could it serve? To explain how such a great crowd gathered around Jesus? There was no need for such an explanation, because the true reason for the great gathering was the enthusiasm that had been awakened in the people by the preaching and healing work of Jesus and the Twelve. It would seem, then, that the evangelist refers to the approaching Passover, not to explain the movement of the people, but rather to explain the acts and words of His Lord which were about to be communicated. Let us bring to the surface John's meaning: "The Passover was near, and Jesus was thinking about it, even though He did not go up to the feast that season. He thought about the paschal lamb, and how He, the true Paschal Lamb, would, before long, be killed for the life of the world. And He expressed the deep thoughts of His heart in the symbolic miracle I am about to relate, and in the mystical message which followed."

The view we advocate about the motive behind the miracle in the wilderness seems to be supported also by the tone which Jesus adopted in the conversation which took place between Himself and the Twelve about how the needs of the crowd could be met. Fragments of that conversation have been preserved by the different evangelists. In the course of that conversation, two suggestions were made by the disciples. One was to dismiss the multitude so that they could get supplies for themselves. The other was that they (the disciples) should go to the nearest town (perhaps Bethsaida Julias, which was probably not too far away) and purchase as much bread as they could get for 200 denarii. At least it would alleviate their hunger, even if it was not sufficient to satisfy their appetites (Mk. 6:37; Jn. 6:7). Both of these proposals were possible. Oth-

erwise, they would not have been suggested. For the Twelve had not spoken without thinking, but only after considering the issues. This is apparent from the fact that one of them, Andrew, had already ascertained how much food would be immediately available. The question about provisions for the crowd had evidently been on the disciples' minds. The two proposals were the result of their deliberations. What we wish to point out is that Jesus does not seem to have given any serious consideration to these proposals. He listened to them and was pleased to see the generous concern of His disciples for the hungry people. Yet, He listened with the demeanor of someone who intended from the very beginning to pursue a different course of action from any that they might suggest. He behaved like a general in a council of war whose own mind is made up, but who is willing to hear what his subordinates have to say. This is not simply our inference. For John actually explains that this was the way our Lord acted on the occasion. John tells us that Jesus asked Philip the question, "Where are we to buy bread, that these may eat?" Then he adds the parenthetical remark: "And this He was saying to test him; for He Himself knew what He was intending to do" (John 6:5-6).

### *The Results of the Miracle*

This, then, was the purpose of the miracle. Now, what was the result? The swelling tide of enthusiasm rose to its full height and moved the multitude to form a foolish and dangerous plan. This crowd wanted to crown the wonder-working Jesus and make Him their king instead of the unrestrained despot, Herod. They said, "This is of a truth the Prophet who is to come into the world" (John 6:14). They were on the verge of coming and taking Jesus by force to make Him a king. So He found it necessary to escape them and went alone to a mountain (John 6:14-15). These are the explicit comments of the fourth Gospel. Matthew and Mark only imply these same ideas. They tell how Jesus *immediately made* the disciples get into a boat and go to the other side after the miracle in the desert (Matt. 14:22; Mark 1:45). Why was He in such a hurry? Why was this so urgent? Without a doubt, it was late, and there was no time to lose if they wanted to get home to Capernaum that night. But why go home at all, when at least some of the people were going to spend the night in the wilderness? Shouldn't the disciples stay to look after them? No. Would it have been responsible for Jesus' disciples to leave their Master alone in such a situation? Without a doubt, the reluctance of the Twelve to leave sprang from their asking themselves these very questions. Their feelings were noble. Yet the command by Jesus presupposes the fact that unusual circumstances existed, such as those recorded by John. In other words, the most natural explanation of the fact recorded in the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) is that Jesus wanted to remove both Himself and His disciples from the foolish enthusiasm of the crowd. It is beyond questioning; this was an enthusiasm with which the disciples were in sympathy. For that reason, He arranged for them to sail away at dusk across the Sea, while He retired into the solitude of the mountains (John 6:15-16).

What a sad ending that came from such a hopeful movement! The kingdom has been proclaimed, and the good news has been extensively welcomed. Jesus, the Messianic King, has become the object of fervent devotion to an enthusiastic population. But, watch out! Their ideas of the kingdom are radically mistaken. If put into practice, it would mean rebellion and ultimate ruin. Therefore, it was necessary for Jesus to save Himself from His own friends and hide Himself from His own followers. How Satan's tares get sown among God's wheat! How easily enthusiasm runs into foolishness and harm!

The result of the miracle did not take Jesus by surprise. It was what He expected. No, in a sense, it was what He had purposed to happen. It was time for the thoughts of many hearts to be revealed. And at least one of the reasons the miracle was performed was to help reveal people's hearts. Jesus provided a table for the people in the wilderness and gave them the grain of heaven and sent them food until they were full (Ps. 78:19,24-25). He did this in order to test them and to know what was in their hearts (Deut. 8:2). Did they love Him for His own sake, or only because they expected worldly advantage? He knew beforehand that many followed Him for secret purposes, but He desired to bring the fact home to their own consciences. The miracle gave Him the opportunity and enabled Him to say, without fear of contradiction, "You seek Me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate the loaves, and were filled" (John 6:26). It was a searching word. It puts all of His followers who profess His name, not only then, but now, in a position where they have to examine their thoughts and ask themselves the question, "Why do I profess Christianity? Is it because I have a sincere faith in Jesus Christ as the Son of God and Savior of the world, or is it because I have thoughtlessly complied with tradition because I am worried about my reputation, or because I want worldly advantage?"