

Prayer

Lord Jesus Christ; when we have done what we can for others and for You, give us the courage to leave things in Your hands. Grant us the peace and confidence that can come only from You, and help us accept Your gracious and ultimate authority over everything we do. May we live to show others that our faith means that we really do trust You, each moment of the day. Thank You, Lord Jesus, AMEN

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: Nuclear power

Pray for politicians who have the responsibility of deciding how nuclear power should be used in their countries, and how much electricity is required. Pray for godly wisdom.

On-going prayers

- *Pray for Israel and the consequences of its election results*
- *Give thanks for the joy of worship and the love of God*
- *Pray for Australia and the terrible loss of life there in fires*

Meditation

What is the truth behind Your love, O Lord?
A love which made the world and chose a people,
Led a broken nation through the desert,
Spoke through the lives of people good and great,
And wept and bled when all seemed lost because of sin;
Then triumphed in a plan of unsurpassed beauty,
Sending Jesus to our world to save the lost,
Your Son, who took the world's rejection on the Cross,
That good might conquer death and show itself the victor:
A love that rose from death in triumph, showing all the world
That its best and only hope is in its Saviour!

It is a love that only finds a home in you and me,
Because our past and present make us ever lost
Unless we place our future's hope in Him
Who longs, in love, to be at home in us.

Bible Study - Mark 8:1-10

¹ In those days, a great crowd had gathered yet again without anything to eat, so He gathered his disciples around and said to them, ² 'I feel deeply for the crowd, because they have been with me now three days and have had nothing to eat. ³ If I send them away to their homes hungry, they will collapse with exhaustion on the way because some of them have come a long distance.' ⁴ His disciples replied, 'How can anyone find enough bread to feed all these people here in this deserted place?' ⁵ So Jesus asked them, 'How many loaves do you have?' They said, 'Seven.' ⁶ He directed the crowd to sit down on the ground. Then He took the seven loaves, and having given thanks, he broke them and gave them to his disciples to distribute to the people; and they gave them out

to the crowd. ⁷ They had a few small fish, and after He blessed them, He instructed that these should be distributed as well; ⁸ and the crowd ate and were satisfied. The disciples picked up the broken pieces left over, amounting to seven baskets full. ⁹ There were about four thousand people, and He sent them on their way. ¹⁰ Straight away after this, he got into the boat with his disciples and went to the region of Dalmanutha.

Review

For those who are studying the Gospel of Mark for the first time, it may come as something of a surprise to discover that having recently fed five thousand people (6:33-40), Jesus performs an almost identical miracle again (8:1-10)! If you check what happened in the earlier miracle, you will realise that although the stories are remarkably similar, many of the details are quite different. What is going on? Why should Mark, who wrote a Gospel with fewer incidents than any other Gospel, waste valuable space by repeating a story? If Jesus performed a miracle once then we should have difficulty believing he could do it again, but why did Mark feel it necessary to record two instances of it?

Whilst preparing for this study, I came across a number of scholarly commentaries that offered little explanation of the passage. They said it was merely a repeat of the earlier feeding of the five thousand, and did not even ask the obvious question; 'why'? I was amazed, because to dismiss the passage in this way is not good scholarship, the story should at least be investigated. The reason why I stress this is because later in the Gospel, Mark tells us that in Jesus' mind there was clearly a difference between the two, because He asked the disciples to explain them both (8:19,20)! If Jesus asked this, then surely, we should take up his challenge. Alongside this, it is worth noting that together with Mark, Matthew also records the feeding of four thousand (Matt 15:32-39) as well as five thousand (Matt 14:13-21), but Luke and John only record this story once each, as the feeding of five thousand (Luke 9:10-17, John 6:1-14).

This problem has fascinated scholars from the earliest times. From early records of Christian commentaries on Mark's Gospel (4th century AD) comes this suggestion; that the feeding of the five thousand describes the gracious mercy of the Lord towards Jewish people, and the feeding of the four thousand describes the Lord's gracious mercy to the Gentiles. The general theme of both stories is the open-hearted generosity of God towards needy people despite their individual or national circumstances. However, as we have recently discovered through tracking Jesus' movements around and beyond the Sea of Galilee, Mark was keen to tell us that Jesus' ministry was to both Jews and Gentiles. It seems logical therefore, that he should record both feeding miracles, each one having characteristics that relate to these two groups of people, first Jews, and then Gentiles. In the feeding of the five thousand (6:33-40) the crowd was Jewish, and at the end, twelve baskets full of leftovers were collected symbolising the twelve tribes of God's new Israel. In the feeding of the four thousand, the crowd was Gentile (8:10), and the baskets numbered seven, a number generally reckoned to indicate 'completeness'; in this case, all the peoples of the world!

If we study further, we find other significant features that all point in the same direction, thus telling us that Jesus ministered to Jews and Gentiles alike. In addition, a close look at chapters 6 to 8 reveals that there is a pattern of similar stories around the feeding of the four and the feeding of the five thousand, and this suggests that Mark knew exactly what he was doing and why. His Gospel story was heading towards a special climax, after which Jesus would head for Jerusalem (11:1f.), and die not for the Jews alone, but for all people including Gentiles.

Discipleship

Personal comment:

The text today asks us to consider the fact that the Gospel is for the whole world. I find that whilst writing these studies, I never seem to escape this issue, rather like the call of God to all His followers to be 'one' and love each other. What I find challenging is that if you speak to people about each topic, Christian unity or the mission of Christ for the whole world, you will often find that they become defensive. Christ's mission to the whole world is minimised to a local church setting and a few others people know about, and the message about unity becomes a call for people to love their friends. If you think I am being sarcastic, then I ask you to try doing this, and see whether people are eager to grasp the idea of the immensity of the Gospel challenge.

Ideas for discipleship programme

- *In order to challenge yourself to consider this in detail, take a newspaper for the day, and look at each article in turn. Consider how the Gospel might make a difference to each situation you read about.*
- *Pray about the differences between Jew and Christian today, indeed, about the differences between Jews and all other people. Ask the Lord for mercy on His people, and mercy on all peoples especially those who have not heard the Gospel.*

Final Prayer

Lord Jesus, guide my lips to praise You in all I do and say. May my speech reflect what is good, may my actions display care, and may my thoughts be focused on the Good News of the Kingdom. Help me, therefore, to know Your presence, and practice it; in Your name Lord Jesus: AMEN.

Even to this day, preachers often state (as if it was a fact) that Jesus ministered only to the 'lost sheep of the house of Israel'. This is a quote from Matthew (Matt 10:6), where Jesus gave instructions to the disciples for their first mission; it was not a comment to define His entire ministry. Jesus ministered to Israel because it was God's intention that the 'Good News' would go out to all people by means of His chosen nation; but it is a matter of fact that Jesus frequently ministered to Gentiles as well as Jews. The Jewish people were indeed recipients of God's special grace, but they needed to know that they the Gospel, as God always intended, had no cultural boundaries.

Going Deeper

There are a number of things which we must now do in order to study the text in more detail. Firstly, look at the details of the feedings of the five and four thousand, and see what this tells us. Secondly, look at the structure of stories around the two feeding miracles and see what this tells us. The feeding of the four thousand certainly helps us understand Mark's Gospel!

Comparing the feeding of the five thousand and the four thousand.

In the first sentence of our passage, Mark places the word 'again' in an emphatic position (8:1), drawing attention to the story. He seems to be saying to us, 'pay attention to this, because Jesus did this a second time.' The beginning of our passage (8:1f.) is quite different from that in the earlier story (6:30-35). On the earlier occasion, the crowd had chased Jesus and the disciples as they sought to find a place to spend some time together (6:30,31) for rest, and this all took place around the Jewish towns alongside Lake Galilee. Jesus responded to the people because 'they were like sheep without a shepherd'; a typically Jewish description of God's people in Old Testament times, desperately seeking their true leader, the Messiah.

In our passage today, Jesus was returning to the region of Lake Galilee from Tyre (7:24), and heading towards Gentile territory around the 'Decapolis' (ten Gentile towns around Lake Galilee and beyond – see 7:31). He reports that this particular crowd had been around Him for 'three days' (8:2) and although Jesus does not say how He had dealt with this crowd, it is almost impossible to imagine that He would have done anything other than teach them. However, three days of intense teaching on a remote hillside sounds extraordinarily taxing, and this detail indicates the strength of the Gentile thirst for knowledge of Jesus and the things of God, which is something of a surprise given our expectation that Jew and Gentile lived quite separate lives and in different communities. Perhaps Jesus' previous forays into Gentile territory and the preaching of the Gospel by the man called 'Legion' (5:1-20 – see my notes on this passage) had something to do with the size of the crowd? Nevertheless, three days was a long time for people to be away from supplies of food and water, and Jesus' concern for them was obvious (8:3). Indeed, Jesus says more about His feelings for these people (8:2,3) than about almost any other people in the whole Gospel; it is a rare insight into Jesus' emotions; expressed, moreover, towards the Gentiles!

The next important difference between the incidents is the number of loaves used for the miracle. We can never know exactly how the circumstances contrived for these things to happen, but we can well understand that God was working by His Spirit within these details to help people understand their deeper meaning. What Mark presents to us is clear; the numbers do have meaning. In the first story (6:38), five loaves stand for the five 'books' of God's Law which defined the Jewish people; this was the Pentateuch (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy); and in the second story, our passage has seven loaves, with the number seven being commonly recognised as representing 'wholeness'; in this case, 'all the world', i.e. Gentiles. The New Testament has numerous occasions when

the number seven and its derivatives are used in this way. The number of nations in the whole world was considered to be 'seventy'; then in Acts 6:3, the apostles appointed seven deacons to look after the growing needs of the church, largely because of the needs of Gentile widows (called 'Hellenist' widows in Acts 6:1f.). In addition, the number of Gentile churches who received a revelation from God in the book of Revelation was seven (Rev 1:4,11).

One other detail is significant, and this is the word used for 'basket'. In the first story, an apparently distinctive Jewish word for 'basket' is used which usually refers to a bag used by beggars for collecting whatever scraps they could find (Greek, 'kophinos', from which the word 'coffin' is derived!). However, the word for basket is different in our story of the four thousand, being a common Greek (Gentile) word for a wicker 'fish-basket' ('spuris' – see 8:8). Some people feel that this explains the somewhat casual inclusion of 'a few small fish' in verse 7; possibly, these were left over fish supplies brought by the people which the disciples managed to find. They were small and insignificant to the people who had gathered, but Jesus miraculously made enough out of them to feed the whole crowd, along with the bread.

If the differences between the two stories are significant, then those things that are the same will also tell us something. The similarities include these features: Jesus was emotionally concerned for both sets of people (6:34, 8:2); the disciples displayed a lack of understanding at what was going on (6:35-37, 8:4); Jesus directed the people to sit down in an orderly manner (6:39, 8:6); Jesus blessed the food before distributing it (6:41, 8:7); the crowd ate and were 'satisfied' (6:42, 8:8); and Jesus personally dismissed the people (6:45, 8:9) before getting into a boat (6:46f. 8:10). These similarities must not be allowed to fool us into thinking that the incidents were one, for it is far more likely that this miracle happened on a number of occasions in Jesus' ministry, just as Jesus undoubtedly healed and delivered far more people than is recorded in our Gospels. Some of the details may have become mixed up in the oral re-telling of the stories, but the Spirit has worked through everything that happened to inspire both Mark and Matthew to record each incident. They indicate God's love for all peoples and the whole world. Both stories need to be interpreted in this light, and preferably with reference to each other!

The story sequences around the feeding of the five and four thousand in Mark

The comments I now share come largely from the analysis of this subject found in the commentary by Dennis Nineham in the Penguin series. He suggests that once the two 'feeding' stories are recognised as 'couplets', then we can also see another pattern emerge in Mark's Gospel involving the stories which follow the feeding of the four and five thousand:

A	B
Mark 6:35-44: The feeding of the 5,000	Mark 8:1-9: The feeding of the 4,000
Mark 6:45-56: Jesus crosses the Lake	Mark 8:10: Jesus crosses the Lake
Mark 7:1-23: Controversy with Pharisees	Mark 8:11-13: Controversy with Pharisees
Mark 7:24-30: 'The children's bread'	Mark 8:14-21: The Pharisees' 'leaven'
Mark 7:31-37: Healing miracle (at Bethsaida?)	Mark 8:22-26: Healing miracle (at Bethsaida)

What does this table show us? Nineham's commentary does no more than point us to the 'art of the story teller', hinting that Mark used this doubling up of themes in order to emphasise them prior to what comes next in the Gospel (which is the famous highlight of Peter's declaration of faith in Jesus - 8:27f). However, this is more than art in storytelling.

It does indeed appear that Mark intended us to see this pattern by selecting events for his Gospel from Jesus' ministry which helped him best tell the story. However, the reason for the pattern does appear to be to provide a conclusive summary of Jesus' Jewish and Gentile ministry, before Peter's declaration of faith at Caesarea Philippi (8:27-30). After this event, the focus of Jesus' ministry changed, and although He performed some healing miracles, He concentrated on teaching more specifically about His coming death and resurrection (see 8:31f., 9:30f., 10:32f.).

If we read these cycles of stories in this way, they give us a clear message. First and foremost, Jesus' work showed God's love for Jew and Gentile which provided for their needs; for the 'feeding' miracles were physical signs of spiritual realities. Secondly, Jesus was always on the move to bring this message to all people everywhere and thirdly, Jesus did not stand back from confronting the religious authorities who had corrupted the true message of God (see 'controversy with the Pharisees' above). Next, Jesus constantly looked for faith and discernment; in the Gentile woman (7:24-30), and the disciples (8:14-21), and He continually sought to minister healing and deliverance to the people He met who needed His help. It does not take much to translate all this into a conclusive and strong message for us today.

Application

The general direction of our study today has challenged us to think about our faith on a large scale. The world Jesus knew was smaller than the world we now know exists, but God knew what He was doing by declaring a Gospel that was to be applied to the whole world and to all humanity. The church must be engaged in constant activity in order to fulfil its mission, and this should be true of a church at local level as well as the structures of our larger, sometimes national or international churches as well as Christian organisations. In addition, just as Jesus confronted the religious authorities of His own day, God's people need to be constantly alert against the evils of religiosity which the devil will use amongst us to try and prevent the fulfilment of our mission. This does not mean that we must be 'against' all religious structures, but rather, we must foster the gift of discernment so that we know the difference between 'mere religion' and 'the power of faith' which the Holy Spirit activates. If we take our eyes away from the path of humility and faith which our Lord commends and to which He loves to respond, then we are indeed in trouble; and in addition, the example of Jesus' own healing ministry should at least give us a clue about how we present ourselves to the world. The Good News of Christ ministers to people's lives according to their need, so that they might respond to the Living God who has blessed them. We are the agents of this ministry.

This is all powerful stuff from Mark's Gospel; but the passages mentioned in this study lie at the very centre of his Gospel and they summarise Jesus' earthly ministry. They demand our attention!

Questions *(for use in groups)*

1. Discuss in your group whether you think that what is said in the study is sufficient to demonstrate that Jesus' ministry was to Jew and Gentile alike?
2. Examine the scriptures mentioned in the last section of the study and discuss how you think these stories fit together.
3. Should we expect all the details of stories about Jesus to mean something, or is this pushing things a little too far?