

## Prayers

### **To God**

Give yourself 5-15 minutes to be quiet with God and wait on Him with expectation. You do not have to be silent, just be attentive and focus on Him

### **For myself**

Lord Jesus Christ, I am frail in some things and strong in others, but I do not always know my own weaknesses and strengths. Come by Your Holy Spirit to give me a more heavenly perspective on my abilities, so that I neither get lost in false humility nor fail to grasp what I am capable of in Your service. Guide me into all truth, especially the truth about myself, I pray: AMEN

### **For others**

Pray for the leadership of your church, especially those who do much to enable it to function but without seeking a reward.

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## Meditation

Let the Lord of glory fill your heart;  
You have nothing to fear,  
Let Him govern all your ways and inspire all your living.

Let the Lord of love bless you daily,  
You have nothing to fear,  
Let Him into the inner reaches of your soul and nurture you.

Let the Lord of life enthuse you,  
You have nothing to fear,  
Let Him purify your mind and fill it with His knowledge.

Let the Lord of power thrill you  
You have nothing to fear,  
Let Him do His works of awesome strength through you.

Let the Lord of creation inspire you,  
You have nothing to fear,  
Let Him use your life to do His will on earth and in heaven.

Let the Lord of all complete you,  
You have nothing to fear,  
Let Him make sense of everything in your life, now and forever.

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## Bible Passage

### **Luke 9:12-17**

<sup>12</sup> The day was drawing to a close, so the twelve approached Jesus and said,

*"Send the crowd away, so they may go into the surrounding villages and countryside to find lodging and get provisions, because we are in a remote place here."*

<sup>13</sup> He replied to them,

***"You give them something to eat instead."***

But they said,

*"We have no more than five loaves and two fish, unless, that is, You want us to go and buy food for all these people."*

<sup>14</sup> Now there were around five thousand men.

So Jesus said to His disciples,

***"Make the people sit down in groups of about fifty each."***

<sup>15</sup> They did so and made everyone sit down. <sup>16</sup> Then, taking the five loaves and the two fish, Jesus looked up to heaven and blessed and broke them, and gave them to the disciples to distribute to the crowd.

<sup>17</sup> Everyone ate and was filled, and what was left over was gathered up into twelve baskets of broken pieces.

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## Review

In yesterday's reading, we found out that Jesus had withdrawn to Bethsaida with the disciples in order to have some quiet time with them after their first attempts at mission. He was not hurried, and because time would pass before Jesus faced the full anger of Herod and the authorities in Jerusalem, He knew that He had more to do. He did indeed want to spend time with the disciples, but pressing around Him, the crowds were still in need of His love and care, and He ministered to them through the day until *'the day was drawing to a close'* (9:12). The stage was set for one of the most significant miracles of Jesus' ministry, the feeding of the five thousand, as recorded in today's reading.

Remarkably, this great miracle is the only miracle found in all four Gospels, apart, that is, from the miracle of the resurrection. For this reason it stands out among the miracles as one that probably had the greatest impact on the early Christian church. Today, the story as recorded for us seems plain enough. Jesus enabled five thousand people to eat a hearty meal through the miracle of five loaves and two fish being sufficient for them after being blessed, broken up and shared! Some people feel they can dismiss the miracle as a piece of cunning played out on gullible people, but such an interpretation is far too devious. Luke chapter 9 describes Jesus' compassion for both the disciples and the crowds, the disciples in their mission and the crowds in their need of God's love. If we have followed this, they will be led to a deeper assessment of this genuine miracle.

The disciples came to Jesus with the situation, and it must have pleased Jesus to see that they were concerned enough to want to act on the people's needs. He wanted them to be

pro-active in ministry. But to help the disciples further Jesus then tested them, challenging them to deal with the situation themselves. He was not being 'off hand' with them, or standing back from everything, he wanted God's love to be shown through their obedient service. Of course, the real challenge they faced came when they were asked by Jesus to go into action and distribute the small quantity of food available without asking any further questions. But their obedience in the face of normal logic was rewarded with a double miracle of grace. The crowds were more than adequately fed, and the disciples proved themselves in their Lord's service, ultimately collecting up twelve baskets of 'broken pieces'.

But still, people have continued to question this miracle over the centuries. Some claim that a miracle such as this is merely the report of an effective picnic, where the sharing of the five loaves and fishes encouraged all to share their food. This seems a pleasant, almost Gospel interpretation, but it is not, because it does not fit with the clear theme of God's miraculous provision, which permeates Jesus' work at this point in the Gospel.

One other serious objection to this miracle comes from those who say that Jesus Himself promised that He would not employ miraculous techniques to feed people. They remind us that the devil tempted Jesus to make bread out of stones, with Jesus famously retorting '*man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God*' (Matt 4:4). Would it not have been right, then, for Jesus to preach to the starving crowds and ignore their hunger? Unfortunately, such suggestions blind us to what actually happened whether in Matthew's report of the 'temptations' or in the feeding of the five thousand. Consider this:

- Jesus did not do something to deal with his own hunger – but that of others.
- Here, Jesus did not turn stones into bread, he turned food into more food.
- The purpose of the miracle when it was done was not to glorify Jesus, although it would eventually do this of course, the miracle was done for the good practical reason of caring for others.

In summary, in the 'temptations', Jesus resisted doing miracles that would glorify Himself, but in His ministry, He frequently did miracles to glorify God. Remarkably, here in the feeding of the five thousand, Jesus stood back to allow a miracle to emerge from the ministry of the disciples! This is a powerful scriptural point; those who allow Jesus to be their guide in mission and ministry will find that miracles emerge from their obedience!

After the miracle, twelve basketfuls of leftovers are gathered, and it has been traditionally reckoned that this somehow represents the twelve tribes of Israel. I reckon that it was one basketful for each of the twelve disciples, the people who would be the founders of the new 'twelve tribes' of God's new people, His Church. The whole miracle meant a great deal to the early church because here, Jesus affirmed through a miracle, that he would work through the obedience of His apostles and disciples.

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## Going Deeper

### ***Notes on the text and translation***

**V13 'you give them something to eat instead'**

Other translations:

'you give them something to eat' (NIV)

You might think it a liberty of me to add the word 'instead' to the end of this sentence when other translators do not. In the first part of the sentence however, there is a small Greek particle 'de', which indicates that this is Jesus' riposte to the disciple's comment (verse 12). I have added '*instead*' to pick up this nuance to the text, and it makes the whole verse read well.

#### **V14 'unless, that is, you want us to go and buy food'**

##### Other translations:

'unless we go and buy food' (NIV)

'unless we are to go and buy food' (NRSV)

The Greek says something like this '*if it is true indeed that we are to go and buy food*'. It is my belief that this is a colloquial way of saying that the disciples thought Jesus wanted them to go and buy food, and they were checking this out. If we do not translate the passage in this way, then it makes the disciples' motives rather blurred.

## **Further Comments**

### ***In a remote place***

Luke reports that this miracle took place in Bethsaida (9:10), which was a town on the northern side of Lake Galilee, away from the territory ruled by Herod (9:7,8). Jesus clearly wanted to get away from the prying Herod. There is evidence that Jesus sought out desert places for various reasons, firstly to be with God at the beginning of His ministry (Luke 4:1f.), and secondly to pray (Luke 5:16,33, 6:12). This is the only recorded event in which it seems that Jesus sought out a lonely place to teach a large number of people. It was far enough away for provisions to be a problem, but it seems that the people were hungry for all that Jesus offered (His ministry of preaching and healing), and they had ignored the problem of food.

### ***Blessing the bread and the fishes***

Throughout His ministry, Jesus shared food with his disciples, for they followed Him and went with Him everywhere. It seems to have been a habit of His to bless food, break it apart and share it around. Of course, this is all Jesus does here, but this does not mean that everyone received a small piece, as if this was some kind of early 'communion' service! The story is specifically about people's need for food, and Luke says openly that they had enough and were satisfied; they were 'full up'.

On this occasion, Luke informs us that Jesus '*looked up to heaven*' (9:15) as he broke the bread. Sometimes, people make a point of saying that 'heaven' is not 'up there' as ancient people once believed, and everyone knows that space lies beyond the atmosphere of our planet. Nevertheless, 'looking up to heaven' remains an appropriate way of addressing God or seeking His blessing. Although we know that it is possible to fly in aeroplanes, our natural manner of life is rooted on the ground, and gazing up is a physical expression that looks beyond the world of our normal existence.

### ***The miracle of Moses***

The provision of bread for eating is a miracle of the Old as well as the New Testaments. Moses called on the Lord for the provision of food when the people of Israel began their journey through the desert. They had to get used to the miraculous from the beginning of their journey as a nation, and in memory of this, some of the manna was ordered to be kept by God's people throughout the centuries (Exodus 16:32). The people of Israel, and certainly

the people of the early church, would not have forgotten this, and Jesus' provision of bread in this miracle would have come across to them as a clear claim of being greater than Moses. The miracle was important, but it was also important that those who witnessed the event and ate the food and were satisfied, and that later, they passed it on through others to the Gospel writers.

It is worth bearing this connection in mind when reading through the rest of Luke 9, for we will soon see Jesus transfigured on the mountain top (Luke 9:28-36) and meeting with Moses and Elijah, both of whom are connected with major miraculous events in the Old Testament, and who represent 'the Law' and 'the Prophets'.

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## Discipleship

### ***Application***

#### ***Jesus works through His disciples***

The first application point we must pick up from this scripture is the work of Jesus through His disciples. Jesus demonstrated in this miracle that despite their faults and failings, God was at work through the disciples, and His people are no less His disciples today. God will indeed do miracles of grace through us to respond to the needs of people. I believe that the Christians of the early church spotted this message within this story, and this is why it is in all the Gospels. For this reason, we should take this as a word of encouragement. The world is full of vast need, and God wants to meet this through the ministry of His servants, you and me. He wants to work miracles through us and so draw people closer to the Kingdom.

There is one further point worth making here, though it is a thought that does not come directly from this passage. Not everyone who is a recipient of God's miraculous provision will respond to it with faith and thence benefit from God's saving grace. This much is obvious to us, but it should not stop us from offering what God always offers to people, whether it be the miracle of His love in provision for our needs, or the miracle of His saving grace.

#### ***Large numbers seeking Jesus***

If we think about it, it is astonishing that Jesus should minister personally to five thousand people, or as the other Gospels remind us, five thousand men, not counting women and children (Matt 14:21). Some have doubted whether in the internet age, people will still be willing gather in such large numbers in seeking help. Surely, we should be encouraged to believe that if needs are indeed met by the love of God ministered through His disciples, crowds, perhaps thousands, will come forward. If it does not happen in sheltered western countries where people feel that they can provide for themselves whatever happens, it certainly happens in other countries where vast numbers of people live, even today, in atrocious conditions. God knows the need of each person, and calls on His disciples to minister accordingly.

#### ***Miracles***

Can we abandon arguments about whether we believe in miracles or not, and accept whatever God chooses to do through our obedience? Our faith is based on an absolute miracle, which cannot be explained by any rational logic, and this is the gracious and miraculous work of our salvation through Christ. It is a miracle that Jesus was raised, and if this is the basis of our faith, then we should not feel it necessary to question other works of God.

## ***Ideas for what to do***

- Look back through your own life as a Christian, and ask yourself whether miracles have occurred when you have been obedient to the things God has asked of you?
- Have there been any miraculous events within the life of your church, and what have they done for the work of God in your midst? Make a resolution to talk about these things within your fellowship.

## ***Questions (for use in groups)***

1. Discuss in your group what you believe to be the most important feature of this miracle.
2. Imagine that you are in the crowd of people who have come to Jesus. What are your needs? How do you react to the miracle?
3. Why does the ministry of Jesus contain so many miracles, and why are they all so different?

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## **Final Prayer**

Lord Jesus Christ, thank you for the wonderful blessing of being Your partner in mission. Thank You for trusting me to be Your servant, and thank you for doing miracles of grace even through me. Do even greater things through me for Your Kingdom, I pray; **AMEN**

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