

“John: Problems Solved”

Exodus 16:1-15 • John 6:1-21

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Let me ask you something. How big is your God? The Nineteenth Century philosopher Thomas Carlyle said, “Men are like the gods they serve.” This is true. You will become like whatever you worship and serve. The way you think about God will affect how you think and how you act and how you worship.

In your mind is God distant or close? Loving or harsh? Forgiving or vengeful? Caring or indifferent? Powerful or impotent? Your view of God determines how you approach Him (or run away from him). However, no matter what you think, chances are your understanding of God is still too small. That’s exactly what we find in today’s reading from John 6.

The disciples’ view of God was too small. After a time of busy ministry in Jerusalem, where He was questioned and attacked by the religious leaders, Jesus leads his disciples away for a retreat on the other side of the Sea of Galilee. Instead of having a quiet retreat a large crowd followed them. John says that the people were following because they had seen the signs Jesus was doing healing the sick.

As we look at this story, keep in mind that the disciples have already seen even more signs than the crowd. They saw him heal the man at the pool and the child of the official. They saw him know the thoughts of the woman at the well. And they saw him turn water into wine.

Verse 3 says that Jesus went up on the mountain, and there sat down with his disciples. There is a lot of imagery here. For one thing, the mountain reminds us of Moses meeting with God on Mount Sinai. And sitting is the posture of a teacher. Jesus is about to teach his disciples, but he’s not giving a lecture. He is about to demonstrate to them that He is God.

We begin by looking at the problem. Verse 5 says that Jesus saw the large crowd coming to this very remote place. The problem at hand will be how to feed them. Since this is all about teaching his disciples, Jesus decides it’s time for

a pop quiz. Just the thought of a pop quiz still makes me nervous. Anyway, verse 6 tells us that Jesus is testing them.

He begins with Philip. Jesus asks him, “Philip, where are we going to buy enough bread for this crowd?” I love that it says that Jesus already knew what he was going to do. You and I encounter problems in life. That’s pretty much guaranteed. If you don’t have any problems, come see me and we will try to get you some. Jesus already knows about your problems, even before you know about them. And he already knows what He’s going to do. But He tests us to see how much we trust him. Numerous studies have shown that it is during those difficult seasons of life that our faith grows the most. Sometimes God allows us to go through difficult times in order to strengthen our faith and bring us closer to him.

Philip thinks about the problem for a moment, does some quick math, and decides that it’s impossible. He says, “We can’t afford it. There’s no way. Two hundred denarii wouldn’t be enough for everyone to even get a bite.” A denarius was a coin that was worth about the average day’s pay for a laborer. It might help to think about it like this. In Texas today, the average laborer makes a little over \$140 a day. So 200 denarii would be the equivalent of more than \$28,000. Philip says that even 30 grand worth of bread wouldn’t be enough to feed that crowd. Philip’s God is too small. What are the problems in your life that you’ve decided are impossible? You’ve looked at all the facts and come to the conclusion that there is no way out of it.

Then comes Andrew, Peter’s brother. Apparently Andrew is a lot like Peter and doesn’t always think before he speaks. Andrew says, “there’s a young boy here with five barley loaves and two fish.” NOW he thinks about it and adds, “but what are they for so many?” Andrew’s God is too small. How often have you

looked at what you have to offer and thought, “This is worthless?” Most of us want to offer God our strengths. We struggle to give him our weaknesses. But Jesus wants to take whatever you have, no matter how small, and use it to bless others.

The boy had five barley loaves and two fish. Let’s start with the fish. These were not 28-inch redfish. They were more like sardines. They were very small. Same thing with the barley loaves. When we hear the story we tend to think of loaves of bread like you get at the bakery. But these would have been very small, maybe the size of a Twinkie. And they were barley, which was mainly used to feed animals. Only poor people ate barley. That’s what Jesus uses to feed maybe as many as 15,000 people.

He had all the people sit down on the grass. Then “Jesus took the loaves, and when he had given thanks, he distributed them to those who were seated.” How often do you stop to thank God for what you have when you know it’s not nearly enough? Jesus thanked His Heavenly Father. We should, too. Then he started passing out the food and everyone ate – and not just a bite like Philip thought. We’re told that they all ate as much as they wanted and there were twelve baskets left over. Jesus turns this meager, nearly worthless offering into a feast that blesses thousands. He can do that with whatever you offer Him as well.

This is the only miracle recorded in all four gospels. Interestingly enough, over the last 100 years or so there have been many people who have tried to provide an explanation that strips the story of the miraculous. One explanation, which you may have heard, theorizes that when Jesus showed the people the generosity of the little boy giving up his lunch that others who had brought food were inspired to share as well. Let me just say that an explanation like that does violence to the Word of God! The whole point is that this is a miracle. Jesus does what only God can do. That leads us to the second miracle in this passage.

The people who ate realized the miracle and decided that Jesus was “the Prophet who is to come into the world!” They connected the bread in the wilderness with Moses and the manna. Jesus realized that they were going to try to force him to be the human king they want, so he withdraws to be alone with the Father. If Jesus, being God incarnate, needed time alone with the Father, maybe you and I do, too.

The disciples, however, were sent back across the lake. They were sailing at night when a storm came up. The wind was too fierce to put the sail up so they had to row. They rowed and rowed all night but by about two in the morning they had only gone three or four miles. That’s when they see Jesus walking on the water toward them. Here they were, facing another problem and their response was to try to solve it by their own strength. And they were failing. Now when God is literally bring the solution, their response is fear. Of course, I’m sure you can understand why. It’s not every day you see someone walking on water. Add to that the fact that it was night and they were out on the water, both of which always have negative connotations in the Bible, and they are exhausted from rowing.

I think this is a good time to point out that the disciples were in this predicament, out on the lake in a storm in the middle of the night, *because* they were obedient to Christ. Think about that. If they had not done what He told them to do, they would have been safe. If Moses had ignored the burning bush or simply decided not to go back to Egypt he never would have had the difficulties all those years in the wilderness. If Paul had stayed in Tarsus he would have avoided a lot of persecution and danger as well. But they also never would have experienced God working through them! Jesus warned us that if we are His followers we *will* have trouble. But it’s so very worth it to have Jesus coming to you in the midst of the storms of your life.

When Jesus gets near the boat he says in verse 29, “It is I; do not be afraid.” But this isn’t a great way to translate it. What he really says is,

“I am Who I am.” You may remember that when Moses asked God who he should say sent him, God said, “Tell them I am who I am.” Jesus identifies himself as God and says, “you don’t have to be afraid any more.”

Neither do you. Whatever winds are blowing in your life, whatever problem you are facing,

Jesus wants to help. He wants to show up in the middle of your problem. And He is able to help. Christ has authority over everything in heaven and earth. He can walk on water and multiply resources to meet your needs and even exceed them. The question is, do you believe God is big enough?

Amen.