

John 6:1-21

Mission Impossible: Use Some Kid's Lunch to Feed Thousands¹

Introduction: We all face troubles in life (disappoints, setbacks, impossible situations, things we dread). If you are not in a trial right now, I'm happy for you, I really am. Enjoy it while you can! Ultimately, all of us are either in the idle a trial, coming out of a trial, or headed into one. I want to offer a perspective on trouble: God has designed these challenges with *you* in mind. One pastor called these trials, "great opportunities brilliantly disguised as impossible situations."² Someone else's impossible situation (we can learn from today) is recorded in John 6.

*****What did people conclude when Jesus used some kid's lunch to miraculously feed 5,000 men (6:1-14)?** They concluded that Jesus was "indeed the Prophet" who had been predicted to come by the Hebrew Scriptures (6:14).

Was the crowd right or wrong in deducing that Jesus was "indeed the Prophet" (6:14)?
They were absolutely spot-on.

Moses was a key figure in Judaism. This long-awaited prophet was predicted to be at least as important as Moses:

ESV Deuteronomy 18:18-19 . . . I [Jehovah] will raise up for them [a future generation of Israelites] a prophet like you [Moses] . . . I will put my words in his mouth, and he shall speak to them all that I command him. And whoever will not listen to my words that he shall speak in my name, I myself will require it of him.

The Rest of the Story: They were right that Jesus was "indeed the prophet". Jesus was, however, much more than a prophet. He was God the Son.

- **"after this" (6:1):** "After this" points back to chapter 5, the confrontation between Jesus and the Pharisees in Jerusalem. The clash occurred because Jesus healed on the Sabbath and then claimed to be equal with God, 5:18. As a result, their goal was to kill Jesus.
- **"the other side" (6:1):** After His contentious conversation with the Pharisees, Jesus left Jerusalem, and went (sailed?) over to the "other side" of the Sea of Galilee (better known to John's readers as the Sea of Tiberias³). From a Jewish perspective, the "other side" was the less inhabited eastern shore,⁴ known today at the Golan Heights.

According to 6:2, what motivated a large crowd to follow Jesus to the other side? They followed Jesus there because of the signs (healings) that he was doing on the sick.

¹ This event is also recorded in Matthew 14, Mark 6, and Luke 9.

² Chuck Swindoll, "The Problem of Facing Impossibilities, John 6:1-14", *Living Insights*, 40.

³ Tiberias was the Roman emperor from A.D. 14-37 ("Tiberius", *Fausset's Bible Dictionary*, Bibleworks software). A new city named Tiberias had recently been founded on the western shore of the sea, and over time the sea took on its name. Older people knew it as the Sea of Galilee, younger people knew it as the Sea of Tiberias.

⁴ Matthew 14:13 describes it as a "desolate" area.

Once Jesus and the disciples got to his desolate place across the sea, He had them hike up a mountain. Why do you suppose Jesus took the trouble to take His disciples up on a mountain (6:3)? See 6:5. It was likely so the disciples could get a panoramic view of the huge crowd that was coming toward them. He wanted them to appreciate the immensity of the problem He was about to give them: of feeding so many people.

Felt Need: Jesus, the master teacher, knew how to surface a felt need so as to cause His disciples to pay attention! He gave them a big problem with which to wrestle. They became teachable and appreciative of the solution when it came.

Why did John want us to know that the Passover was at hand (6:4)?

- a) Throughout John's Gospel, he frequently gave same historical details that at the very least add to the historicity of the event (2:13, 5:2, 7:2).
- b) Large numbers of pilgrims thronged into Jerusalem for Passover, which may account for how so many men were temporarily free from their occupations to follow Jesus around:

ESV **John 11:55** Now the Passover of the Jews was at hand, and many went up from the country to Jerusalem before the Passover to purify themselves.

- c) The Passover was the time when the Israelites celebrated their deliverance from slavery to Egypt. It would like our July 4. As such, those with nationalist passion would be moved to think about deliverance from Rome.

As a "test" Philip, Jesus asked Philip where bread could be bought for so many people (6:5-6). How did that constitute a test? How was that a test? Evidently the test was to see if Philip turned to Jesus for the solution or not. Yes, Philip believed in Jesus. Yes, Philip knew Jesus could turn water into wine and heal the sick. Perhaps the test concerned if Philip had any inkling that Jesus was powerful enough to create food to feed so many men.

Motive: These 5,000 men followed Jesus to an area where no food was readily available. Planning ahead, most would have brought along their own food. None of them, not even the disciples, expected to be fed by Jesus. I would argue that Jesus performed this miracle, not for the benefit of the crowd, but for the benefit of the disciples.

Tests—vs—Temptations: It is hard to tell a test from a temptation, especially when you are in the middle of it. Here is how the two are different:

- God will never tempt you. Temptations are from Satan and are designed to weaken your faith. A temptation is a solicitation to do evil.
- Conversely, Jesus did test Philip, and He will test you. Tests are from God and are designed to strengthen your faith.

Based on 6:7, did Philip pass or fail the test? Rather than answer the actual question of where to buy bread, Philip calculated how much it would take to buy enough bread.⁵ Philip's obvious conclusion was that they had nowhere near enough money. Thus, since Philip failed to turn to Jesus for the solution, he probably failed the test.

⁵ At that time, one denarius was what a laborer got paid for one day's work (Dennis & Grudem, *ESV Study*, 2033).

Why did Jesus single out Philip (6:5)? Perhaps Philip made the mistake of making eye contact with Jesus! Jesus may have posed the problem to Philip simply because he was from the nearby town of Bethsaida (1:44). In any event, Philip served as representative of all the disciples.

In 6:8-9, Andrew helpfully chimed in that he had found a boy who had five barley loaves and two fish.⁶ Did Andrew pass or fail the test (6:6)? Andrew knew the kid's lunch wasn't enough to feed so many people.⁷ Like Philip, Andrew also failed to look to Jesus for the solution.

Literary Purpose: John may have added Andrew's comment to heighten the immensity of the coming miracle: no place to buy food, no money to buy it with, and very little food already on hand.⁸

According to 6:10, how many people needed to be fed? There were five thousand "men". Why John only mentioned the men, omitting any women and children present, may become evident later, in 6:14.⁹

•"much grass" (6:10): What did the fact that there was grass there have to do with anything (6:10)? The grass evidently made it much more comfortable for the men to sit down. It may further indicate that Jesus came down off the mountain and fed the crowd on the flatter, glassy land near the water. If nothing else, small details like this show the historicity of the event; John was right there when it happened.

The Challenge: This was written by John the Apostle, eye witness of everything we are reading. John was there! Either it is true or it is not. Either this really happened, or it did not. *Are you ready to call John a liar and religious charlatan?*

Sneaky Test: "he distributed them" (6:11): *As a test, explain away 6:11 in all seriousness and wait for the various responses of the class:* The real problem was selfishness with the crowd. It was an awkward social situation. The time came to eat. Those with food kept theirs hidden away, lest they have to share with others. However, when they saw the generosity of this boy—willing to share his meager lunch of barley loaves and fish—those with hidden food were shamed, brought out their food, and shared it with others. The result was that everyone had enough to eat. "It may be that this story represents the biggest miracle of all—a miracle which changed human nature, and altered, not loaves and fishes, but men and women."¹⁰

An Actual Miracle: Those who don't believe in miracles explain away what John recorded. Some, such as William Barclay, held that John never intended to imply that Jesus miraculously multiplied the fish and the loaves. We must be discerning in the things we read or hear. For instance, the orthodox view is that the whole of the Bible is inspired by God. Some pastors who don't believe this might say, "Let us turn to the Word of God *as it is contained* in Genesis" (the hidden message being that not all of Genesis contains the Word of God). In reality, this was a bona fide miracle, similar to the widow of Zarephath's oil and flour jars that never emptied:

⁶ The Greek here for fish is *opsarion*, not *ichthus*.

⁷ The barley cakes were probably more like pancakes and the fish were little pickled fish the size of sardines.

⁸ Carson, *John*, 270.

⁹ Matthew 14:21 records that women and children were present, too.

¹⁰ William Barclay, *The Gospel of John*, Vol. 1, The Daily Study Bible, 2nd ed., (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1956) 206.

ESV 1 Kings 17:14 . . . thus says the LORD the God of Israel, “The jar of flour shall not be spent, and the jug of oil shall not be empty. . .” And she and he and her household ate for many days. The jar of flour was not spent, neither did the jug of oil become empty, according to the word of the LORD that he spoke by Elijah.

Philip calculated that two hundred denarii would only buy each person a “little” bread (6:7)—and no fish at all. According to 6:11, after Jesus got involved, how much did each person get? Each person got as much as he wanted, not only of bread but of fish as well.

“Given Thanks” (6:11): Jesus gave thanks for the food, a good example for us to follow. A common Jewish thanksgiving over a meal was, “Blessed are You, O Lord our God, King of the universe, who brings forth bread from the earth.” We are not to bless the food, we are to bless God who provides the food.¹¹ Blessing it won’t make poison food safe, and won’t transform Cheetos from junk food into health food.

Exactly how much food was leftover (6:12-13)? The leftovers filled twelve baskets.

Why do you suppose Jesus worked it out so that there were exactly *twelve* full baskets leftover (6:13)? There was one basket for each of the twelve disciples to have his very own basket full—of faith!¹²

Archaeology: Around A.D. 350, Christians built a church building near the site that this happened. The building was destroyed by invading Muslims around A.D. 614. In the early 20th century, archaeologists excavated what remained of the church’s floors and found a Mosaic of two fish and the loaves.¹³



The Real Test (?): Maybe the ultimate “test”, the final exam, Jesus devised (6:6) was yet to come, far out in the sea (see next paragraph).

******What did Jesus do when perceived that they wanted to make Him king by force (6:15)?**

He wanted nothing to do with it and managed to withdraw back to the mountain “by himself”. What Jesus did was similar to what American Civil War General William Tecumseh Sherman said when he learned that he was being considered as a candidate for the 1884 presidential election: “I will not accept if nominated and will not serve if elected.”¹⁴

¹¹ Carson, *John*, 270.

¹² The weakness of this thought is that this would be the first in John that the disciples would be identified with the number twelve (Brown, *John*, 234); but see John 6:67.

¹³ “Church of the Multiplication”, en.wikipedia.org. Accessed August 22, 2019.

¹⁴ “Shermanesque statement”, en.wikipedia.org. Accessed August 20, 2019.

Potential Guerrilla Force: John may have called attention to the fact that there were five thousand *men* (6:10) to highlight the presence of a potential, potent guerrilla force of eager volunteers, stirred up by the Passover and ready for action against the Romans.¹⁵

Why was Jesus not interested in being king (6:16)? Jesus' mission in His first coming was spiritual, not political:

ESV **John 18:36** Jesus answered, "My kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were of this world, my servants would have been fighting, that I might not be delivered over to the Jews. But my kingdom is not from the world."

The next time He comes, it will be quite political.

Where the people wrong in thinking that "the Prophet who is to come" (6:14) would also be a king (6:15)? That thinking was correct. It was based on the whole of the Hebrew Scriptures. The problem was one of timing. They failed to discern that there would be two comings of "the Prophet." Thus, the people reasoned that since the first prophet, Moses delivered the Israelites out of slavery to Egypt, then surely the second prophet, Jesus, would deliver them from Rome.¹⁶ They saw Jesus as a liberator like unto Simon Bolivar or George Washington.

People Placement:

- 1) That Jesus escaped "again to the mountain" implies that He and the disciples had come down off the mountain to feed the crowds.
- 2) That Jesus escaped "by himself" implies that he left the disciples behind with the crowd.

*****What new test did the disciples face (6:16-21)?** That evening, they left Jesus behind on the mountain and sailed across the sea (which was seven miles wide and thirteen miles long).¹⁷ Each disciple had his very own basket of faith right there beside him, yet after dark, in rough seas, three and a half miles out in the middle of the sea, they were *terrified* when they saw Jesus walking on the water toward them.

If 6:16-21 were a test, did the disciples pass or fail? Why? They failed. Rather than trust Jesus, they were terrified.

ESV **Mark 6:51-52** . . . they were utterly astounded, or they did not understand about the loaves, but their hearts were hardened.

Motive (6:17): It is possible that Jesus sent the disciples away to keep them from getting contaminated by the crowd's political ambitions. In any event, Jesus was also surely aware that He was sending them directly into the path of a coming storm. He was creating another teaching/learning situation.

¹⁵ Carson, *John*, 270.

¹⁶ Carson, *John*, 272.

¹⁷ J.D. Douglas, *New Bible Dictionary*, 2nd ed., (Wheaton: Tyndale House, 1986), 404.

Application: Similarly, the Lord will occasionally send you directly into the path of a coming storm in your life. However, the Lord is always watching over us. Even in this event, Mark records:

ESV **Mark 6:46-48** . . . he went up on the mountain to pray. And when evening came, the boat was out on the sea, and he was alone on the land. And he saw that they were making headway painfully, for the wind was against them. And . . . he came to them, walking on the sea.

John stated that the disciples left in a boat, and that “Jesus has not yet come to them” (6:17). How would they have expected Him to come after they had set sail? Jesus obviously had directed them leave for Capernaum. Perhaps He told them to wait until dark for him to come back down off the mountain, but then to sail without him at dark if he did not come.

ESV **Mark 6:45** . . . he made his disciples get into the boat and go before him to the other side . . .

Jesus actually walked on water (6:19). What does that tell us about Jesus? He was no ordinary guy. He had authority over nature. He really was who He claimed to be: God in human form. Jesus was both fully God and fully man. His two natures were fused, but not confused.

Since it was dark (6:17, 19), how were they able to see Jesus coming? Jesus did not glow in the dark. He did not have a backlit halo. Passover (6:1) coincided with a full moon.¹⁸ Storm or not, anyone who has control over nature can arrange things so that there was enough light for them to see what He wanted them to see!

•**“Do not be afraid” (6:20):** These comforting words of Jesus have application for us as well:

ESV **John 14:1** Let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God; believe also in me.

ESV **John 14:27** Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid.

Two miracles occurred that night. The first was Jesus walking on the water (6:19). What was the other (6:21)? Even though they were in the middle of the sea, the moment they took Jesus aboard, they were immediately at the land.

Application: God can *immediately* get us out of whatever storm of life we are in, when we are ready or His purposes are accomplished. He is the one who sets the timer on how long we are in the oven.

Tip of the Iceberg: Liberal Anglican commentator William Barclay had a problem with the supernatural. He opined that this was, “not some extraordinary miracle, but a simple incident.” According to Barclay, what *really* happened is that the disciples were actually very close to the land and that Jesus was simply walking along the beach at the water’s edge (never mind that Mark 6:47 records they were “in the middle of the lake”). The reason they were immediately at the land when Jesus got in the boat was simply because they were already at the shoreline.¹⁹

¹⁸ Barclay, *John*, 211.

¹⁹ Barclay, *John*, 211-212.

When people explain away the miracles that are recorded in the Bible, it often signals a much deeper problem. Barclay, for example, did not believe that Jesus was God in human form. He said, "in Jesus I see God" but then clarified, "It is not that Jesus *is* God."²⁰ He further declared that Jesus' death on the cross was not to pay for sin, but instead to show how much God loves us.²¹ Barclay further stated that, "people in the congregation are eager for the new truth," and "I don't think that God is nearly so much interested in orthodoxy as some of his servants are."²²

So What?

Why did John the Apostle record the feeding of the five thousand and walking on the water? That Jesus could feed five thousand, then walk on the water, and then immediately transport them to the land, shows that Jesus is "indeed the Prophet who is to come into the world" (6:14). Here is the application for unbelievers:

- 1) *Is Jesus right about who He claims to be?*
- 2) *If He is right, what have you done about it?*²³

Background: Anyone doing serious research by-passes secondary sources and goes directly to primary documents. This letter that John the Apostle wrote is a primary source. It dates from the first century and was written by an eye witness. John knew Jesus personally and traveled with Him for three years. He was commissioned by Jesus to one of His personal representatives. If this is a lie, it is a first-century lie, and John is the one who made it up.

What take away is there for believers in this passage? You are going to go through storms in your life (6:18). We must trust that Jesus is in control of the universe and in control of our own lives. No problem in our lives is outside His control or too big for Him to handle (6:11). He might not resolve it as we wish, but we are called upon to trust him to give us wisdom and strength and we must not be afraid (6:20). Along the way, He will give us our own basket full of fish to build our faith and reassure us that He is with us.

ESV Jeremiah 32:17 Ah, Lord GOD! It is you who has made the heavens and the earth by your great power and by your outstretched arm! Nothing is too hard for you.

ESV Jeremiah 32:27 Behold, I am the LORD, the God of all flesh. Is anything too hard for me?

ESV Luke 18:27 [Jesus] said, "What is impossible with men is possible with God."

ESV Isaiah 30:18 . . . the LORD waits to be gracious to you, and therefore he exalts himself to show mercy to you . . . blessed are all those who wait for him.

**** = Ask this question before reading the text. This will engage people's minds and focus their attention.

•You can hear this lesson being taught at SermonAudio.com/NTRF.

²⁰ William Barclay, *William Barclay: A Spiritual Autobiography* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1975), 49.

²¹ Barclay, *Autobiography*, 51.

²² Barclay, *Autobiography*, 82, 100.

²³ Bob Deffinbaugh, "13. Like Father, Like Son (John 5:19-30)". Bible.org. Accessed August 02, 2019.

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