Mark 8:1-10 Feeding of the Four Thousand

The feeding of the four thousand and the feeding of the five thousand share more in common than any two stories in the Gospel of Mark. Both stories occur in deserted settings. Both emphasize Jesus' compassion on the crowds. Both repeat the question, **" 'How many loaves do you have?' "** But there are also a lot of differences. The first feeding began with five loaves and two fish, the second with seven loaves and **"a few small fish"**. The numbers of people fed also differ. In the first account, "five thousand men" (6:44) were present, which would amount to a larger number when women and children were included (maybe 20,000 or 25,000). In our account today **"four thousand"**. In the first feeding the crowd was with Jesus one day (Mark 6:35); in the second, they had stayed with Jesus three days, so they'd simply run out of whatever food they had brought.

8:1 In those days, when there was again a large crowd and they had nothing to eat, Jesus summoned His disciples and said to them, 2 "I feel compassion for the people because they have remained with Me for three days already and have nothing to eat. 3 And if I send them away hungry to their homes, they will faint on the way; and some of them have come from a great distance."

"During those days" links the feeding of the four thousand generally to Jesus' sojourn in the Decapolis, largely gentile cities on the south east side of the Sea of Galilee. Jesus remained on the eastern shore of the lake where a mixed population of Jews and pagans lived. The "large crowd" gathered around Jesus, and has accompanied him for three days and begins to run short on food. In describing the crowd Mark uses a word for "remain," prosmenein, which indicates a special adherence and commitment to Jesus. This is a crowd especially committed to hearing what Jesus has to say, and both the "abiding with Jesus" language, and the 3 days of teaching indicate a better reception among gentiles than Jesus had received among His own Jewish brethren.

In the feeding of the five thousand the disciples brought Jesus' attention to the impending crisis among the crowd (6:35–36), but here it is Jesus who perceives the problem. He summons the disciples, with concern for the people. Matthew 15:32 is even more explicit in Jesus' concern for them: **32 Now Jesus called His disciples to Him and said, "I feel compassion for the people, because they have remained with Me now for three days and have nothing to eat; and I do not want to send them away hungry, for they might faint on the way."** Jesus not only recognizes the objectivity of the need but personally identifies with it" **'I have compassion for these people.' "** This expresses Jesus' gut-wrenching emotion on behalf of these people.

The detail **that " 'some of them have come a long distance' "** makes sense, since the wilderness nature of the Southeast side of the Sea of Galilee, and the relative lack of settlements, besides the 10 cities of the Decapolis means that they were far from their homes, and far from a place where they could buy provisions. To remain so long away from home and food supplies means that they were excited, and taken up with Jesus' teachings, and were persistent in abiding in Him, which was remarkable among this largely Gentile crowd. The personal nature of their attachment to Jesus is emphasized by the fact that they listened for three days, even when some had run out of food in an area where even a day's journey within the Decapolis region would be too far after a day or two without food. Jesus was concerned, that In their condition, **" 'they will collapse on the way.' "** They have been for three days in an isolated location and their provisions have been exhausted. Many had already been without food, maybe many for days, and they have been weakened through hunger. Jesus was afraid that those who had traveled a long distance would die of dehydration and fatigue on the way home, and so Jesus demonstrates His compassion, Instead of describing them as being like sheep who have no shepherd, Jesus takes care of them like a shepherd by leading them to truth, and also by taking care of their physical needs. They had been living **by every word that proceeds from the Mouth of God,** and so Jesus would take care of the bread that they

needed, just like He said. Jesus demonstrated His compassion for them first by feeding them the Word of God, and then by feeding them bread.

4 And His disciples replied to Him, "Where will anyone be able to find enough bread here in this desolate place to satisfy these people?"

The perplexity of the disciples **" 'But where in this remote place can anyone get enough bread to feed them?'** might better be translated, **" 'For who is able in this remote region to satisfy these [people] with bread?'** Although, on the surface this seems just like their lack of faith in the feeding of the 5,000. Surely, having earlier witnessed the feeding of a similar crowd, the disciples could not be so forgetful or dense to ask such a question. Since they had experienced one such miracle, shouldn't they have expected another in this instance? But that's where hard hearts comes in. How many times has God delivered you or I through difficult circumstances, and yet when the next difficult situation comes, we are tempted to think inside—"yes, God did it then, but will He do it now?". Lack of faith is part of the flesh, and it sneaks up on us, if we're not careful.

This time, Jesus doesn't ask His disciples what they are going to do. They'd failed that test by demonstrating a lack of faith with the 5,000. With the feeding of the 5,000 in Mark Ch. 6:37 they had not envisioned that a multitude could be fed and they emphasized the impossibility of the situation with disrespectful irony toward Jesus. But here, there is an indirectness in their response, which is different in tone and function. They have faith enough to know that the question of procuring bread should be answered by Jesus, and so basically they are saying: <u>What do you intend to do?</u> Baby steps this time for the disciples. And the disciples had learned a little—instead of flat incredulity, they are looking to Jesus at least, not trying to figure out a way to do it themselves. That's at least a little progress. Jesus wanted to teach them that feeding spiritually has the highest priority, but then afterward God's provision of physical needs was also important. They needed to understand this priority, and also the provision. And the same God who did one, could do the other.

5 And He was asking them, "How many loaves do you have?" And they said, "Seven." 6 And He *directed the people to recline on the ground; and taking the seven loaves, He gave thanks and broke them, and started giving them to His disciples to serve, and they served them to the people. 7 They also had a few small fish; and after He had blessed them, He told the disciples to serve these as well.

Jesus' counter-question concerning the number of loaves available to them, "**How many loaves do you have"?** lets the disciples know that just like before, Jesus knew what He was going to do all along, and is using these circumstances to teach them lessons about the Kingdom of God.

This question, **"How many loaves do you have?"** is the exact same question that He'd asked them in Mark 6:38. Jesus is the teacher of the disciples. And like a teacher, He's using repetition to drive home the point to these hard-headed disciples. It's almost as if Jesus is saying "Alright, here we go again, let's see if you guys can come up with the correct answer this time!" This time, they just said "**Seven"**, without the disrespectful commentary on the meagerness of the provision compared to the need. Of course 7 loaves and some small fish among 4,000 men, plus women and children would not do any more in terms of supplying need than 5 loaves and 2 fish among 5,000. But, in this case, Jesus is in charge. Unlike the feeding of the five thousand where Jesus has the disciples seat the crowds (6:39), Jesus personally seats the crowd in the Decapolis. Likewise, in the feeding of the five thousand the description of Jesus' prayer follows Jewish custom ("looking up to heaven, he gave thanks eulogein, whereas the description in the feeding of the four thousand employs the Gentile-Christian form of blessing, eucharistein ("given thanks,"), from which Christians derived the name Eucharist for the Lord's Supper. For most of this mixed multitude, the blessing of God's name before the distribution of the bread would have been a new action to many of them. This may explain the unusual pronouncement of thanksgiving over fish in verse 7. The

pronouncement of blessing over bread is the normal Jewish practice for beginning a meal, but the blessing of God's Name prior to the distribution of the fish seems to have been intended to teach the people to thank God for their daily food.

8 And they ate and were satisfied; and they picked up seven large baskets full of what was left over of the broken pieces. 9 About four thousand men were there; and He dismissed them.

8–9 The NIV says "about four thousand men were present" for the feeding. "Men" here is not gender specific, for unlike the five thousand "men" of Mark 6:44, the masculine plural ending of "four thousand" implies "people," including men, women, and children. The size of this crowd was considerably smaller than at the feeding of the 5,000, perhaps 1/5th as large.

The scale of the miracle may be slightly reduced this time, but the crowd are no less fully satisfied, and there is plenty to spare. This word for basket is a different word from the Jewish term for basket used in Mark 6:43 for the leftover containers for the feeding of the 5,000. This term is a gentile word for a food basket or hamper, but it could be large enough to carry a person (as it did in Acts 9:25). This use of "satisfied" (Gk. chortazein) repeats the same word used in the disciples' question of v. 4, " 'Where in this remote place can anyone get enough bread to feed (Gk. chortazein) them?' In the miracle of the multiplication of the loaves and fish, the answer to the question is supplied: only Jesus can satisfy the people!

From the church fathers onward the church has rightly perceived that in the feeding of the four thousand Jesus brings saving bread to the Gentiles, as he brought it earlier to the Jews in the feeding of the five thousand. The journey to the Gentiles Jesus has demonstrated that gentiles are neither beyond the reach of salvation nor especially less inclined to seek it, when it is offered. This is contrary to what the rabbi's were teaching about the gentiles, and Jesus needed to make sure that His disciples would understand later that it was God's will that the gentiles be saved. Like in the book of Jonah, Jesus' ministry to the gentiles in Mark 7:24–8:9 reveal that supposed Gentile outsiders are in fact surprisingly receptive to the word of God in Jesus. The journey of Jesus to Tyre, Sidon, and the Decapolis proves that although the Gentiles are ostracized by the Jews, they are not ostracized by God. Jewish bitterness toward the Gentiles does not reflect God's attitude. Indeed God had called them to minister God's truth to us; they just had such a hard time loving their enemies, just like Jonah did. There is a lesson here for the people of God in every age, that our enemies are neither forsaken by God nor beyond the compassion of Jesus. **"And [Jesus] sent them away."** The Greek word for "send away," apolyein, can mean either "to dismiss" or "get rid of"; or "to release" or "liberate." The first is what the Jewish leadership was doing to the Gentiles, and was trying to do to Jesus Himself. The release from bondage, the liberation is what Jesus wanted for the gentiles as well as the Jews, as He satisfies the hungry outcasts and liberates us from our sin.