

# Lesson Seven

*(John 6:1-24)*

There is actually a one-year span of time between 5:47 and 6:1. Up to this point John has dealt with the events which took place during the first year of Jesus' ministry. But he omits the details of the second year of Jesus' ministry, perhaps because the other gospel writers covered them sufficiently. It was during the second year of his ministry that Jesus encountered controversies about the Sabbath observance (Matt. 12), delivered the sermon on the mount (Matt. 5-7), raised a widow's dead son (Luke 7), sent the twelve out in pairs (Matt. 10), visited Nazareth a second time (Matt. 13), and was sought by Herod (Matt. 14). Here in 6:1, then, is beginning of the third and final year of Jesus' public ministry.

## **Jesus Feeds Five Thousand Men**

*(John 6:1-15)*

<sup>1</sup>After this, Jesus went across Lake Galilee (or, Lake Tiberias, as it is also called). <sup>2</sup>A large crowd followed him, because they had

seen his miracles of healing the sick. <sup>3</sup>Jesus went up a hill and sat down with his disciples. <sup>4</sup>The time for the Passover Festival was near. <sup>5</sup>Jesus looked around and saw that a large crowd was coming to him, so he asked Philip, "Where can we buy enough food to feed all these people?" (He said this to test Philip; actually he already knew what he would do.)

<sup>7</sup>Philip answered, "For everyone to have even a little, it would take more than two hundred silver coins to buy enough bread."

<sup>8</sup>Another one of his disciples, Andrew, who was Simon Peter's brother, said, <sup>9</sup>"There is a boy here who has five loaves of barley bread and two fish. But they will certainly not be enough for all these people."

<sup>10</sup>"Make the people sit down," Jesus told them. (There was a lot of grass there.) So all the people sat down; there were about five thousand men. <sup>11</sup>Jesus took the bread, gave thanks to God, and distributed it to the people who were sitting there. He did the same with the fish, and they all had as much as they wanted. <sup>12</sup>When they were all full, he said to his disciples, "Gather the pieces left over; let us not waste a bit." <sup>13</sup>So they gathered them all and filled twelve baskets with the pieces left over from the five barley loaves which the people had eaten.

<sup>14</sup>Seeing this miracle that Jesus had performed, the people there said, "Surely this is the Prophet who was to come into the world!" <sup>15</sup>Jesus knew that they were about to come and seize him in order to make him king by force; so he went off again to the hills by himself.

Lake Galilee (which is called "Chinnereth" in the Old Testament) is still a beautiful body of water today, surrounded by an almost tropical climate. The lake is about 13 miles long by seven miles wide, and fish are still abundant in its waters. The region was heavily populated during the time that Jesus walked its shores.

Jesus and the twelve apostles make their way up the side of one of the many sloping, grassy hills. Since the time for the Passover Festival "was near" (6:4), this episode probably took place in April of 29 A.D. Thousands of intensely curious people gathered there to see what miracle Jesus might perform (6:2).

Critics have tried to create a conflict between this account and that of Mark's, since Mark says that the crowd "went from all the towns and ran ahead by land and arrived at the place ahead of Jesus and his disciples" (Mark 6:33). However, as in most apparent contradictions in the Bible, this one can be resolved with a little common sense. R.C. Foster explains it by saying that Mark "explicitly affirms that the crowd outran the boat, and when

Jesus and the apostles disembarked they found the crowd. Such a multitude — men, women, children; young and old; sturdy, and sick or crippled — would be strung out for miles by such a race. The vigorous ones outran the boat; Jesus saw the situation and picked a natural amphitheatre on the mountain side. By the time the weak stragglers arrived and the multitudes fully assembled, Jesus was seated with His disciples prepared to teach and heal. The accounts are wonderfully *independent* and *harmonious*" (quoted by Paul Butler, in *The Gospel of John*, I, 227).

Just as a teacher has to examine his students so that he may evaluate their progress, Jesus examines Philip in order to help him and the others grow spiritually. Philip mistook an opportunity for a problem. He failed this test because he did not recognize that *God is the source of our supply* and his storehouse is never empty! That is what Paul meant when he wrote, "And with all his abundant wealth through Christ Jesus, my God will supply all your needs" (Philippians 4:19). Philip should have had the attitude displayed by the Army captain who told his soldiers, "Men, we're surrounded by the enemy. Don't let a one of them get away!" But he didn't.

Instead, Philip thinks the situation is hopeless (6:7). So it is Andrew, now labeled "Peter's brother" because of his own unassuming manner, who steps up and suggests a possible solution. He knows that Jesus has marvellous powers, so he ushers a boy into Jesus' presence. The boy has some barley bread (which was not nearly as popular as that made from wheat) and two pickled fish about the size of sardines. Little did the boy's mother know when she packed his lunch that it would wind up in the hands of the Son of God. Andrew has done all that he could, so he leaves the rest to Jesus. (Wouldn't we save ourselves a lot of misery if we would do the same?)

So Jesus begins by having the people be seated, so they can be more easily served and so everyone can see him. More than 5,000 men, not counting women and children (Matt. 14:21), were sprawled on the hillside below him.

And then Jesus does something which one seldom sees in a public place anymore. He bows his head and gives thanks to God for the food he is about to eat. Some Christians are afraid to pray at a McDonald's hamburger stand with twenty people around, but the person they claim to follow did it with well over 5,000 people looking right at him!

After praying, he passes the bread and the fish out and "they

all had as much as they wanted" (6:11). How did Jesus multiply the food? We don't know because the gospels don't say how it happened; they are primarily concerned, as we should be, with what happened and why. And the fact is that after everyone has eaten, they gather up twelve baskets of uneaten bread! No, they weren't bushel baskets, but they were the small bottle-shaped sachels in which a traveler normally carried a day's supply of goods.

This miracle later becomes the "text" which Jesus uses in order to teach the spiritual truth that he is the bread of life (6:22-59). But these people on the hillside aren't really interested in spiritual truths. They begin talking about how Jesus must be powerful enough to help them overthrow the Romans. They did not want to worship and obey him; they wanted to use him to achieve their political and social goals. This was the same temptation presented to Jesus by Satan himself (Matt. 4:8-9). So Jesus leaves them and finds a quiet place to pray (Matt. 14:23).

### **Jesus Walks on the Water**

*(John 6:16-21)*

<sup>16</sup>When evening came, Jesus' disciples went down to the lake, <sup>17</sup>got into a boat, and went back across the lake toward Capernaum. Night came on, and Jesus still had not come to them. <sup>18</sup>By then a strong wind was blowing and stirring up the water. <sup>19</sup>The disciples had rowed about three or four miles when they saw Jesus walking on the water, coming near the boat, and they were terrified. <sup>20</sup>"Don't be afraid," Jesus told them, "it is I!" <sup>21</sup>Then they willingly took him into the boat, and immediately the boat reached land at the place they were heading for.

The disciples waited as long as they could for Jesus to return from praying in the hills. But since it is getting late in the day, they get into a boat and head for Capernaum (6:17).

But before they can travel the seven miles across the lake, a violent wind storm changes the placid waters into a wild, churning sea. Such storms are still common, due to the temperature variations between the lake and the high surrounding mountains.

Assuming that they got into the boat at about 9:00 P.M., here it is already "between three and four o'clock in the morning" (Matt. 14:25). And their tiny boat is still "far out in the lake, tossed about by the waves" (Matt. 14:24). They have been rowing that boat, and probably praying pretty hard as they bailed water out, for

some nine hours. And they are barely half-way across the lake (6:19)!

They were quite unaware, of course, that Jesus had since finished praying and that from his vantage point he was watching their fight to stay afloat (Mark 6:47-48). He sees their problem and responds to it by walking right out across the billowing lake! But the disciples are terrified by the sight of a figure coming toward them through the thrashing waves. So Jesus reassures them by calling out, "Don't be afraid, it is I."

Matthew tells us that at this point Peter calls out, "Lord, if it is really you, order me to come out on the water to you." And Jesus does so, but as Peter was walking toward Jesus he looks around at the leaping waves and instantly begins to sink. Jesus says to him, as he grabs hold of him, "What little faith you have! Why did you doubt?" (Matt. 14:31).

As Jesus and Peter climbed into the boat, the wind died down. And "the disciples in the boat worshipped Jesus. 'Truly you are the Son of God!' they exclaimed" (Matt. 14:33). And they all arrived safely at their destination (6:21).

### **The People Seek Jesus**

*(John 6:22-24)*

<sup>22</sup>Next day the crowd which had stayed on the other side of the lake realized that there had been only one boat there. They knew that Jesus had not gone in it with his disciples, but that they had left without him. <sup>23</sup>Other boats, which were from Tiberias, came to shore near the place where the crowd had eaten the bread after the Lord had given thanks. <sup>24</sup>When the crowd saw that Jesus was not there, nor his disciples, they got into those boats and went to Capernaum, looking for him.

There is certainly something to be said for persistence. And this crowd was, if nothing else, determined to find Jesus — and they did (6:25). It may take time, energy, and trouble, but we cannot afford to ever stop searching for a better, more productive life.

F.W. Woolworth was worth \$20,000,000 when he died, and it was because he didn't panic and throw in the towel when three out of his first four stores failed. Oscar Hammerstein II wrote five shows, each of which failed on Broadway within six weeks of opening, but he didn't give up. He went on to write and produce "Oklahoma," which ran for 269 weeks and returned \$7,000,000 on his \$83,000 investment. And a writer named John Creasey received 743 rejection slips from publishers before he was able to

get one word in print. But he kept at it and became one of the world's most prolific mystery novelists, with his 560 published books having sold more than 60,000,000 copies.

Don't give up! As Paul says, "So let us not become tired of doing good; for if we do not give up, the time will come when we will reap the harvest. So then, as often as we have the chance, we should do good to everyone, and especially to those who belong to our family in the faith" (Gal. 6:9-10).

When Jesus taught the disciples how to pray, he also taught them to be persistent. He told them this story: "Suppose one of you should go to a friend's house at midnight and say to him, 'Friend, let me borrow three loaves of bread. A friend of mine who is on a trip has just come to my house, and I don't have any food for him!' And suppose your friend should answer from inside, 'Don't bother me! The door is already locked, and my children and I are in bed. I can't get up and give you anything.' Well, what then? I tell you that even if he will not get up and give you the bread because you are his friend, yet he will get up and give you everything you need because you are not ashamed to keep on asking. And so I say to you: Ask, and you will receive; seek, and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you" (Luke 11:5-9). Don't give up!

### **Thought Stimulators on John 6:1-24**

1. John 6:1 marks the beginning of what year in Jesus' ministry?
2. What are two other names for Lake Galilee?
3. Why did the crowds follow Jesus at this time?
4. How many people did Jesus actually feed?
5. What was wrong with the people making Jesus their king?
6. Explain the apparent contradiction between John 6:2 and Mark 6:33.
7. How can we develop the habit of seeing our problems as opportunities?
8. Who is the source of our supply?
9. Where have we met Andrew before?
10. Give a personal example of a time in your life when you did all that you could, but then refused to really leave the rest to God. What happened?
11. Discuss the place which prayer has (or doesn't have) in public today.
12. Do you have a "quiet place" (or time) when you pray alone?

13. How did Jesus know the disciples were in danger on the lake?
14. Think of a Christian who has "given up" and drifted away from Jesus. Take someone with you *this week* and go tell that person that you love him and that you want to help him.