

A man came from Baal Shalishah, bringing the man of God twenty loaves of barley bread baked from the first ripe grain, along with some heads of new grain. "Give it to the people to eat," Elisha said.

⁴³ *"How can I set this before a hundred men?" his servant asked.*

But Elisha answered, "Give it to the people to eat. For this is what the LORD says: 'They will eat and have some left over.' " ⁴⁴ *Then he set it before them, and they ate and had some left over, according to the word of the LORD. (2 Kings 4:42-44)*

An Old Testament Miracle Prepares the Way for Christ

"Wax on! Wax off!" Do you remember that line from *The Karate Kid*? If you're my age, that movie is part of your youth and you'll never forget Mr. Miyagi making Daniel wax his car and repeat those motions, "wax on, wax off." Daniel came to Mr. Miyagi to learn karate to defend himself against the local bullies, but it seemed like Mr. Miyagi was using him for slave labor instead. But, of course, if you've seen the movie, you know he was really preparing him for his training. He was creating muscle memory that would kick in when he was fighting. Now, Mr. Miyagi was a purely fictional character in a silly movie from the 1980's. But the idea of preparing people for things that they can't see or understand yet is a universal reality. Teachers do it every day in classrooms from preschool all the way through college. Sometimes, if you think about it, you can see why they're doing what they're doing. Sometimes, you don't understand until the preparation kicks in at a real life moment. But the way God created us, we move through our lives constantly being prepared for what comes later. In truth, God prepares us. Today we see **an Old Testament miracle prepares the way for Christ.**

I.

Now, the incident in our Old Testament lesson is not particularly famous. We don't usually include it in Sunday School. It's only a couple of verses long, squeezed in between a couple of longer, more familiar stories, so even if you've read it, you might have gone right on to the next account without thinking about it much. But when you saw it in the bulletin next to our gospel lesson for today, you might have had an "aha" moment. It clearly is a very similar kind of event to the feeding of the five thousand that we read about in John 6. That's no accident. Many of Jesus' miracles echo Old Testament miracles.

In our Old Testament lesson, a man brings the prophet Elisha twenty loaves of barley bread and some uncooked grain. Elisha tells his servant to feed it to "the people" – most likely the "school of prophets," seminary students who were training to proclaim God's Word. Now, to us, twenty loaves of bread might seem like enough to make sandwiches for one hundred people. But don't think of a loaf of bread like we buy in the grocery store with maybe twenty or thirty slices. Think rather of the kind of bread that you would slice to make a sub sandwich. One loaf is used for each sandwich, right? They probably weren't making sandwiches, but the point is, twenty loaves or big dinner rolls weren't going to feed a hundred hungry young men. So Elisha's servant protests. But Elisha tells him, **"This is what the LORD says: 'They will eat and have some left over.'"** Of course, that's exactly what happens. I don't have to tell any of you who ever had to make a big holiday dinner what a miracle this was!

The parallel with Jesus is obvious. Why did God repeat this miracle? Well, the people in the gospel lesson tell us, don't they? After Jesus feeds them and even provides leftovers, the people say, **"Surely this is the Prophet who is to come into the world."** Jesus did miracles to show the people who he was. Some of the miracles were deliberately part of what we might call "the prophetic tradition" – they were miracles that recalled specific miracles that the prophets of the Old Testament had done to show that Jesus was just as much a prophet as they were. Why did that matter? First of all, because God gave prophets to tell his people what to believe, what to know, what to do. Jesus had to establish that he was a messenger sent by God so that when he challenged the corrupt religious leaders of his day, he would have God's authority on his side. The people needed to know that he was speaking the truth.

But Jesus wanted to show more than just that he was a prophet. He was, as the people said, *the* prophet who was to come. What does that mean? In the Old Testament, starting with Moses, God promised that a great prophet would come, like Moses, the prophet God used to establish his Old Covenant. This new prophet would bring the New Covenant. Other prophets talk about that coming prophet. God gave different pictures of the

Savior in the Old Testament. Sometimes, he spoke of him as a king, as the Son of David who would conquer our enemies and set us free. Sometimes he spoke of him as a sacrifice, a man of sorrows who takes our place and a lamb whose blood washes away our sin. And sometimes he spoke of him as a messenger of God, a prophet, who brings God's Word to us. The people picked up on those differences. They didn't always understand it all but they were waiting for a great prophet.

So how did Jesus show that he was not just any prophet, but that he was the prophet who was to come, the prophet that all of history was pointing toward, the one person who could tell us what we need to know and believe? By being the greatest of all prophets. He didn't just do this miracle once. He did it twice. And he fed far more than just one hundred men. In John six, he fed five thousand people. The other time, he fed four thousand men, plus women and children. In our gospel lesson for today, he didn't have twenty loaves of bread, he had five loaves and two small fish. He had a little boy's lunch. And when he was done, there wasn't just "some left over." The disciples filled twelve baskets with the uneaten food. Jesus showed that he was the greatest prophet the world will ever receive! He is the very Son of God come in human flesh. He has the power of God himself because he is God even while he is one of us. He is the promised Savior.

This incident from the Old Testament is so easy to just blip over. But God put these three verses here for you and me. This miracle that took place 800 years before Jesus was born puts Jesus' miracle into a context of God's own messengers working for his people. But it also shows how much greater Jesus is than any other prophet. **This Old Testament miracle prepares the way for us to see who Christ is!**

II.

But why did God have his Son do this particular miracle? This isn't the only miracle Elisha did that echoes Jesus' work. In the chapter before, he raised a boy from the dead. In the chapter after, he healed a foreigner of leprosy – reminding us of the ten lepers who were cleansed but only the Samaritan, the foreigner came back. But Jesus did lots of other miracles that don't really seem to have a specific Old Testament echo: I don't recall any prophet ever walking on water or rising from the dead. Why did God pick this one?

Because both the Old Testament and the New Testament version of this miracle remind us of all Jesus does for us. Jesus and Elisha both addressed a real life, ordinary need: to eat today. Every day that we live here, we need to eat. We need to sleep. We need clothes. If you live in Michigan, half the year, you need some place with heat in it. We need tuition money and house payments and car payments and insurance payments. We want even more: a middle class standard of living, a satisfying job, friends, spouses, children. Where do we get all those things?

You know I'm going to say from God. And I'm sure you all agree with me. But what if somebody doesn't? What if somebody points out how hard they work for all those things? You do that, too, right? Is there a person here who gets away with a forty hour workweek? Do those still exist in America? How many of you spent years in college preparing for the job you now hold? How many nights and weekends and birthdays have you sacrificed to provide for your family? Doesn't it seem like we do all this ourselves? And God even says, "He who will not work, neither shall he eat." He tells us to do something useful with our hands. But God also reminds us who gave us the ability to work: he did. If your children grow up to be doctors, God gave them those gifts. God blesses our efforts. Why do you have the job you have? Because God made sure you got it. God works through our jobs and our education and our sweat and our seeming good luck, to give us all that we need every day of our lives.

I haven't even talked about doctors and medicine, about police offices and protection from war and violence and terrorism. I haven't mentioned clean water and cars built to safety standards and a dollar that generally holds its value from one day to the next. God provides all that we need through all those things and many more, even though it usually looks like we human beings are doing all the work.

And God does provide for us through miracles sometimes. It's not wrong to pray for a miracle, as long as we understand that it's up to God to provide it or not. But when you're sick, when someone you love is sick, pray and ask God for relief. I have seen God answer those prayers more times than I can count, and sometimes, even the doctors have had to acknowledge that it's a miracle that the person recovered. God works.

If God provides all that we need for this life, but that's all that he provides, then we've come up short. Our greatest need is to defeat death. It's coming. Giving us food and shelter and clothing and medical care pushes it back. But in the end, death always wins. But when Elisha provided for the everyday needs of the school of the prophets, when Jesus made sure that the crowds who came to see him had something to eat before

the long walk back home, they were showing us the depth of God's real world compassion for us. He cares about what we really have to face. That means, he cares about the fact that we have to die, too. He has dealt with that issue. He has conquered death for us.

Jesus has given us eternal life. When life here ends, we go on living with him. God did not create us to die. He made us to live with him, in love and joy, forever. So what happened? Sin happened. Adam and Eve disobeyed God and they brought sin and death into this world. Death has reigned over all people since. Every human being since then was a sinner – except for one: Jesus. To supply our greatest need, Jesus was born into the world we have to experience. He lived our life. He knew what it felt like to be hungry and cold. He knew what it felt like to be poor. He experienced the realities of having to work for a living and struggling to keep up, let alone get ahead. He watched his father and mother strive to provide for their children and he watched people die. He knows what we need.

So he came to set us free from all the needs of this sinful world. He set us free from sin itself by living a perfect life in our place. Then he died to pay for the sin that we were born with, the sin we inherited from Adam and Eve and from our own parents. He died and paid for the sins that we commit every day – the grumbling and complaining about how hard life is, the lack of interest in God and his word, the selfishness that rears its ugly head over and over again in our hearts. Jesus died and paid for it all. Then he rose and declared that we are forgiven. And in that resurrection he fulfilled our greatest need. We are free from death. If we live long enough, we will see him come back and we will never die. But even if these bodies do die, our souls go to be with him immediately. When he returns, he will raise these bodies and perfect them and make them newer and better than they ever were before. He will purge our hearts of all sin and wrongdoing and make our world new and we will at last live with him forever in that joy and love he always wanted us to have.

Until he does that, he comes to us in love and he deals with all the challenges of our lives here. First of all, he works through that gospel to give us faith that clings to him when life hurts. He gives us prayer, which he always hears and answers. He intervenes in our lives, over and over again, to bless us and protect us and strengthen us. He comforts us with the knowledge that we are forgiven and loved. When the time is right, he brings us home. All that we have here, every blessing of this life and of the life to come, we get from Jesus. And these three short Old Testament verses help us see that. **This Old Testament miracle prepares us to see what Christ does for us.** See it and take comfort in his love. Amen.