

Abundant Provision

Sometimes in counseling, we ask what we call X-Ray questions. These are questions that are supposed to X-Ray your heart, get deep into the very soul of why you are thinking and acting the way you are. Some of those questions are:

1. What do you fear? What do you not want? What do you tend to worry about?
2. What do you think about most often? What preoccupies or obsesses you? In the morning, to what does your mind drift instinctively?
3. What do you think you need?

Probably most times, people's greatest worries and fears have to do with two words, both beginning with p: provision and protection. So much of our mental energy is given to how we will provide for ourselves monetarily, and how we will remain safe and protected from the dangers and threats out there. Provision and protection.

It's not unnatural to do this. Life is filled with dangers. The world is made up of limited resources, for which people must compete. Economies can be harsh, and crime can be high. Unemployment can be rife, inflation can be rising, and dangerous people may abound. Provision and protection ought to be important to us.

But those who call themselves Christians might have to expend the same amount of time as anyone else seeking provision and protection, but we should definitely have a different view of provision and protection. Specifically, Jesus told us in the Sermon on the Mount that worry, a kind of chronic anxiety should not characterise us. When it comes to dangers, Jesus told us ²⁸ "And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. But rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell. (Matthew 10:28)

But where can this very different attitude towards life come from? How do we live life in the same competitive, dangerous world as everyone else, but not live with gnawing anxiety and crippling fear?

We see the answer in two miracles Jesus did, mostly for His disciples' benefit, to teach them two truths, captured in the word abundance.

I. God is a God of Abundant Provision

It's a fairly long period of time after the events of chapter 5. John is actually fast-forwarding through about 18 months of Galilean ministry to an event that happened right at the end of that time. It's the only event recorded by all four Gospel writers, which is significant. Remember, John selected particular signs, particular events which proved the case that Jesus is the Messiah. This is the only mass miracle that Jesus performs, but it is meant to teach a vital life lesson. He follows it up with a sign to the twelve apostles, that carries a similar message.

¹ After these things Jesus went over the Sea of Galilee, which is *the* Sea of Tiberias. ² Then a great multitude followed Him, because they saw His signs which He performed on those who were diseased.

³ And Jesus went up on the mountain, and there He sat with His disciples. ⁴ Now the Passover, a feast of the Jews, was near.

Jesus is up in the province of Galilee, in the north. The other Gospels tell us that Jesus had recently commissioned the apostles to go in twos throughout Galilee and preach, and cast out demons, and to

go in faith, trusting in God's provision. They had done that. And they had apparently been so intensively labouring and travelling that they had had no time to eat. The crying need is food and rest. So Jesus seeks out a secluded place for them rest.

They seem to have sailed across the lake or 'sea' of Galilee, began to be called the sea of Tiberias, named after a town built on its coast, that Herod named after the Roman emperor, and sought out a private place, somewhere near Bethsaida, where Philip was from, and not far from where Jesus had cast out the legion of demons from the man who lived there. But before they can get the rest, crowds are chasing Him down.

Thronging Him is a mass of humanity. Verse 4 tells us that it was the time of the Passover, and so many thousands of people in Galilee would have been making their way south to Jerusalem. Whole families, and moreover, whole families that had already seen and heard Jesus or His twelve apostles work.

They are already on their way to Jerusalem, but here they have a chance to see Yeshua of Nazareth. Lame people are healed, blind people see, the deaf hear for the first time, leprosy skin becomes youthful and unblemished, the demon-possessed are healed with a word. If nothing else, this is the most excitement and entertainment they have had in a long time.

Verse 10 tells us that there were 5000 men. If only four thousand of those men were married, and their wives were with them (which they would have been on the way to Jerusalem) and if there were only three children per family, then this was ultimately, by a conservative guess, a crowd of around 21 000 people.

Now the Gospel of Mark tells us that at some point, Jesus was moved with compassion when he saw the crowds. These are sheep without a shepherd. John the Baptist has been recently executed. The pharisees are false shepherds.

So Jesus and His disciples go up one of the hills surrounding the Lake and begin teaching. The crowds follow. He taught these thousands for several hours in the day. He must have been a powerful outdoor speaker with significant projection.

But the day wears on, and soon it is getting late. Likely the apostles are getting exasperated, and in the other Gospels we read that they tell Jesus to send the crowd away to buy food for themselves.

⁵ Then Jesus lifted up *His* eyes, and seeing a great multitude coming toward Him, He said to Philip, "Where shall we buy bread, that these may eat?" ⁶ But this He said to test him, for He Himself knew what He would do. ⁷ Philip answered Him, "Two hundred denarii worth of bread is not sufficient for them, that every one of them may have a little." ⁸ One of His disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, said to Him, ⁹ "There is a lad here who has five barley loaves and two small fish, but what are they among so many?"

John tells us that Jesus was testing the disciples. What was He testing? Their faith, their trust in Him, their endurance, their philosophy of ministry. They believe that they have run out of time, and run out of energy, and everyone's stomach in running out of food.

But Jesus tests the disciples by putting the problem back in their hands. "We must feed them." To Philip, who was from Bethsaida, nearby, he asks, where shall we buy food for this crowd? Philip answers, 200 denarii is not enough to buy food for all these people. We don't know if that's how much money they had saved for the ministry of Jesus's needs, or if that was just a figure Philip came up with. A denarii was one day's wage, so this is about 200 days of labour, about 8 months

salary. It's a decent sum of money, but not enough. According to current minimum wage, R200 is a day's labour, so this would be R40 000 in similar purchasing power. But if you had a crowd of 21 000, what would R40 000 buy you? A meal of R2 per person?

Philip is mentioning the number not to show possibility, but impossibility.

And then Andrew appears to have been doing a bit of food reconnaissance. And the only thing he can find is the poor lad – the Greek word means little boy – whose mother apparently packed him a lunch for the day. Or perhaps his mother, seeing the crowd, quickly baked these loaves so that he could make a quick sale to the passing crowds. It's not much: it's barley bread, the roughest, coarsest bread eaten by the poor, with some small fish, more like sardines, that are probably meant to be more of a relish to make the hard bread go down. And Andrew seems to be again asking negatively: this is the food we have, but what difference will it make?

Now notice that the disciples' starting point is negative. What can 200 denarii possibly do? What can five loaves and two fishes do? Their perspective is a pessimistic one. We don't have enough and we won't have enough. Their eyes are not on the ministry opportunity and the power of Messiah. Their eyes are on the circumstances, where the needs appear bigger than the supply.

¹⁰ Then Jesus said, "Make the people sit down." Now there was much grass in the place. So the men sat down, in number about five thousand. ¹¹ And Jesus took the loaves, and when He had given thanks He distributed *them* to the disciples, and the disciples to those sitting down; and likewise of the fish, as much as they wanted.

Jesus now calls for organisation, so that no chaos or stampedes break out among so great a crowd. They are organised, according to the other Gospels into groups of fifties and hundreds. They are able to sit down, because there is grass there, and it is still March/April, by end-summer the grass would have been burnt off and the ground too hard to sit on. And remember, the Jews ate while reclining, lying on their side, so you'd need a soft, grassy area to do that.

The boy apparently surrendered all that he had to the master, and this is a lesson of what God can do with your all, however small it may seem to you. Jesus blesses His Father for the food given, probably a prayer like "Blessed are You, Lord our God, King of the universe, who gives us who brings forth bread from the earth."

Jesus gives to the disciples, and the disciples to the groups of seated people. Now, we don't know how this miracle manifested. Did Jesus give some to each disciple, and then as they got to each group and kept dividing, more and more was present, so there was always some loaf, or some fish in their hands? Or was it that as a loaf or fish was given to each group, that as they kept dividing it up, it kept multiplying? Or was it that each disciple had a make-shift basket and would come up to Jesus, and Jesus would break it, as He breaks it, it in His hand, it is not smaller, it is doubled, and He keeps breaking and breaking, to the wide eyes and speechless expression of the apostle standing in front of Him. Likewise the fish, pulling apart the dried and salted fish, but it is not simply in two, it is now four, and then eight, and sixteen, and 32, until the basket is full, and the apostle heads off to his group of fifty or a hundred. And the next apostle comes. And as the apostles feed each group, there Jesus stands, breaking and breaking, and dividing and dividing, and mark it – creating and creating. These are fish that never swam. This is barley bread that was never planted.

And this was not just a snack, the people ate as much as they wanted. It's only when everyone has had as much as they want, that the meal is really over.

¹² So when they were filled, He said to His disciples, "Gather up the fragments that remain, so that nothing is

lost.”¹³ Therefore they gathered *them* up, and filled twelve baskets with the fragments of the five barley loaves which were left over by those who had eaten.

It's a significant statement about our God that with all this abundance, He still does not want any waste. Nothing must be lost. Jesus does not want the ground littered with bread and fish that has not even been touched. This abundance is accompanied with efficiency, order and frugality.

Once they gather up everything uneaten, it fills exactly how many baskets? Twelve. An entire basket for each disciple. Not that he could eat it all on his own, but more than enough for each of the labourers that are already exhausted and tired.

Now there are two very different ways to take this miracle. The first way would be to understand that when you are doing God's will and God's work, you serve a God of abundance, and you will never lack. You may go through seasons of plenty, and seasons of poverty, feast and famine, but Ps 37:25 stands: “²⁵ I have been young, and *now* am old; Yet I have not seen the righteous forsaken, Nor his descendants begging bread. (Psalm 37:25)

Instead, 2 Corinthians 9:8 promises that when you are on company business, doing God's work, the card will not be declined. And God *is* able to make all grace abound toward you, that you, always having all sufficiency in all *things*, may have an abundance for every good work. (2 Corinthians 9:8)

Now I could add all the provisos and all the exceptions and all the qualifications so that it doesn't sound like the prosperity gospel. But since no one here is an advocate of the prosperity gospel, why don't we just let the text stand and let it speak at full volume and say everything it is saying. It is saying, if you do God's work, God will make sure you have all sufficiency for all things, and will have an abundance for every good work.

So when I am not, I have two biblical ways to think about it. One, I can say, this is the five loaves and two fishes moment before God surprises me with abundance. This is the lack before the largesse, the poverty before the plenty.

Two, I can say, am I sure I'm doing God's work so that I can be a channel of blessing. Or am I filled with negativity, pessimism, and small-minded unbelief about my life? Am I withdrawing from involvement and activity, from ministry and service, from hospitality and evangelism, because I do not trust that there will ever be an abundance?

Let us imagine if that boy had hung on to his five loaves and two fish. Let us imagine he had been frightened to hand them over to Christ. What would he have gone home with? Five loaves and two fish. But in the meantime, God would have found another way to feed the crowd. But because he gave up his lunch for God's work, he ended up with far more than he left home with.

So many Christians steadily regress in usefulness, steadily retreat into a life of less, trying forever to do less, have less responsibility, have to do less, forever fighting every attempt God gives to test their faith, grow their spiritual muscles, push them out the nest and spread their wings. Some Christians after 10, 15 years in the faith are more negative, more pessimistic, more unhappy about life and ministry than they were at the beginning. Yet they never stop to ask, what is wrong with me? How did I get here? I should be advanced in faith, doing more, pressing forward, laying hold on victory, extending my usefulness. The lesson of the loaves for the disciples was, when you work for the God of abundance, don't think and live and act like it's a famine. It might be hard times, but that's the moment to trust and obey. You might not know *how* God is going to give an abundance for every good work, but your attitude should be that He will.

But there is another way to take a sign like this, and that's what many in the crowd did.

¹⁴ Then those men, when they had seen the sign that Jesus did, said, "This is truly the Prophet who is to come into the world." ¹⁵ Therefore when Jesus perceived that they were about to come and take Him by force to make Him king, He departed again to the mountain by Himself alone.

The crowd saw this mass miracle, and decide that Jesus is the prophesied Prophet who replaces Moses, the one predicted in Deuteronomy 18:15. Some saw that as Messiah, some saw the Prophet as separate from Messiah; it hardly matters, because they wanted to seize Jesus and forcibly enthrone him. Here is a group of 5000 men, enough for a small army. If you have someone who can do mass miracles, who can feed thousands, He is unstoppable. All the limits which other armies would face: supplies, seasons, times of year, evaporate, if your leader can make your food on the spot. They wanted a king who could be a means to their nationalistic ends: defeat Rome, end taxation, restore Jewish pride, and Jesus can do it. But they don't want Him for Him, they want Him for what He can do.

That's how a lot of people want God's provision. They want Him to bless their business and make them successful. They don't want Him for Him; they want Him for what He can do – bless my business. They want Him to get me a job, or keep me employed, or give me a raise, or provide more money, not because I want Him, and He is my provider as I do His work.

No, they want the provision, the security, the money, the success, the lifestyle, the material comforts, and He is the means to doing it. So Jesus just becomes the exact equivalent of every good luck charm, every magical amulet, every spell of blessing, every spirit and ancestor and god invoked to give me wealth and comfort. Many people tithe, just to make sure they get good luck on their business. Many people pray, just to get good luck on their work. Their lives and fears swirl around meals and money, food and finance, and the whole spiritual realm is just a method for getting that. But as to who this God is, what He is like, they have not even considered the question.

Notice Jesus' response to this kind of exploitation of His provision. He withdraws. He goes into a hilltop by himself. Jesus will not be used, or become a genie in a bottle for those who want him to be so. Those whose god is their belly will find that Jesus will not be their secondary god to support their idolatry.

Abundance is not for those who would abuse it; it is for those who abide in it.

Now the second great area of human need and human vulnerability is protection. We need protection from dangers, threats, calamities, evildoers, accidents, attacks. So a major portion of our lives is taken up with fear over not only if there will be abundant provision, but if there will be abundant protection.

So the second miracle teaches about protection.

II. God Is A God of Abundant Protection

This episode occurs with his disciples by themselves; the previous one taught them with a great crowd, but the real lesson was for them, not for the crowd. Now this is their second lesson, and there is no crowd, they are alone in the boat.

¹⁶ Now when evening came, His disciples went down to the sea, ¹⁷ got into the boat, and went over the sea toward Capernaum. And it was already dark, and Jesus had not come to them. ¹⁸ Then the sea arose because a great wind was blowing.

The disciples had gotten into the boat, and were headed for Bethsaida. It wasn't too far a journey

from where they were. They would have skirted the coast, and stayed fairly close to the shoreline. But as we read here, they were way off course. Instead of being near, they were in the middle of the lake. They were three or four miles in. Though they had been rowing, the wind had blown them further and further in.

But one of the great storms that can hit the Sea of Galilee suddenly occurs. The surrounding mountains act like a funnel which capture wind, accelerate it, and then drop it onto the lake. The disciples are now facing some serious waves, and they are in the dark.

¹⁹ So when they had rowed about three or four miles, they saw Jesus walking on the sea and drawing near the boat; and they were afraid.

Of course they are afraid. The Gospel of Mark tells us they supposed it was a ghost. In their experience, the only humanoid thing that could walk above water would be some kind of disembodied spirit. But this is Jesus, the Second Adam, God in flesh, displaying total lordship over creation. He has lordship over gravity, over liquidity, over matter itself. I picture each of His steps having the effect of not just hardening but flattening the water for several meters ahead of Him, while the choppy waves bounce off His pathway like frightened animals.

Now they are not only terrified about the danger from the waves, being lost and off course, being in the pitch dark, but now they seem threatened by the supernatural. But Jesus quickly helps them to see what their circumstances really are.

²⁰ But He said to them, "It is I; do not be afraid."

It is I, which is literally I am in the Greek. Jesus identifies Himself to them. It is I, your Master, your Saviour, Your Protector. If I am here, then all is well. You cannot be in mortal danger if I am with you.

Now He just showed them an abundance of provision, but here you can see an abundance of protection. He didn't just calm the storm from a distance. He didn't, as in another time, accompany them in the boat, and then calm the storm. Instead, He visibly shows them that He has total authority and lordship over the storm. The very thing that is threatening them, He is walking over it, it is under His feet. They cannot be harmed if the threat is under the feet of Jesus.

Here is Jesus showing them that their fear of being harmed is misplaced. Jesus never lost sight of them, and never intended harm to come to them. He rules the circumstances that seem so threatening. So the next thing they do is to happily bring Him into the boat, even though, as He had just shown, He didn't need a boat.

That wasn't the point. The point was the presence of Jesus drives away all fears of harm and danger.

²¹ Then they willingly received Him into the boat, and immediately the boat was at the land where they were going. (John 6:1–21)

Here is a third miracle. In the pitch dark, with no idea where they are, God miraculously moves the boat to the land, to their destination. Their fear of being lost, or being in the dark for several more hours is instantly relieved.

Now this kind of protection is supernatural. It's miraculous. It's unusual, just as feeding 20 000 people from a boy's lunch is supernatural, miraculous and unusual. Jesus is not displaying how He normally provides and normally protects. He is displaying just how much power and abundance lies

behind normal provision and normal protection. The lesson for the disciples is about how they are responding to this kind of abundance.

If God can feed 5000 men, should you worry and stress and fret over provision? Or should you work hard, trust God and look forward to that abundance taking care of you? Should you worry and stress, and fear over protection? Or should you take sensible precautions, trust God and look forward to the abundance protecting you?

Worry over provision and fear over protection ultimately speak about God's willingness or God's ability. If God doesn't want to provide or protect you, you should worry. But He has said He does. If God wants to but isn't able to, you should worry. But He has show He is able. So with a God both abundantly able, and abundantly willing, we glorify God most with hearts of trust, hearts that are then willing to take risks for God, hearts willing to move forward for God's glory.

Sheep need two things from human shepherds: provision and protection. This is why David wrote these familiar words. Listen for the provision and the protection:

Jehovah *is* my shepherd, I do not lack, ² He causeth me to lie down in pastures of tender grass, ^{He} leads me beside quiet waters.

³ He refreshes My soul, He leads me in paths of righteousness, For His name's sake, ⁴ Also—when I walk in a valley of death-shade, I fear no evil, for You *are* with me, Your rod and Thy Your staff—they comfort me. ⁵ Thou arrange before me a table, Over-against my adversaries, You have anointed with oil my head, My cup is full! ⁶ Only—goodness and kindness pursue me, All the days of my life, And my dwelling *is* in the house of Jehovah, For a length of days! (Psalm 23:1–6)

Why? Because Jehovah is His shepherd. That's the X-Ray question we finish with. Who is your ultimate trust? Where do you find refuge, safety, comfort, escape, pleasure, security? If it is abiding in the God of abundance, it must change your approach to provision and protection. If you find yourself fretting and fearing as unbelievers, then ask, have I come to know this God of abundance? If I have, do I trust Him?