

## **Jesus is the Provider**

By John Ulrich, Lead Pastor

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John 6:1-15

Good morning church! I hope that you had a wonderful Thanksgiving! I hope you spent some time with family or loved ones. I hope you watched some football and that your team won, if that's your thing. I hope you played some games with your family, if that's your thing. I hope you ate yourself into a Turkey Coma, if that's your thing. That's definitely my thing! I think I had enough tryptophan in my system to tranquilize a moose! So I hope you did your thing! But more than anything, I hope your thoughts turned to God and his goodness many times over this weekend.

Thanksgiving is a time when we stop to celebrate God's provision, a time when we remember what he's done for us, how he's provided, how he's protected us, the things he's brought us through the gifts he has generously given in this past year. Thanksgiving is a time when we give thanks! We actually want to live that way every day. We want to live out our days in gratitude to God.

Sometimes that an easy thing to do. But sometimes, it's more difficult. Sometimes we're not to the point where we've seen God's provision. Sometimes he hasn't brought us through. Yet sometimes, we don't know exactly what God is up to in our lives. We're in the middle. There are times like that. Maybe you're going through a time like that right now, a time where you want to be thankful, but it's tough. What do we do in those situations? How can we be thankful all year, whether we are seeing God's provision or not?

Today we are continuing in our series called "More than just a Nice Guy." This is a walk through the early chapters of John's gospel. Today we've come to a story in John's gospel that ironically, providentially fits perfectly with our Holiday of Thanksgiving. It's a story where people experience a need, where Jesus meets that need and where they praise Jesus and give thanks to God for his provision as a result of this miracle. There's a feast involved! So it's a perfect passage for this Thanksgiving weekend!

This is also a well-known story. It is the only one of Jesus' miracles that is found in all four gospels, so you've probably all heard of it. It's called "the feeding of the 5,000" or "the miracle of the loaves and fishes."

True to his nature, in this story John is going to weave many threads together. He's going to use the story of this miracle to teach us several things. He uses it to teach something about faith, to teach something about who Jesus really is. Later in the chapter, John uses it to teach about the Lord's Table. The story ends with praise, praise for what Jesus has done and for who he is. So we're going to apply this story today to Thanksgiving, to recognizing God's pattern of provision and generosity and to praising him for it.

Here's what we're going to do today. As we look at this passage, we're going to see four steps that God often takes us through when he's going to provide for us. This story shows a four step pattern that I think God often uses in our lives when he wants to bring us to Thanksgiving. We might just call it "four Steps to Thanksgiving."

I'm sure there are people here today at each one of the four steps in this cycle, so my goal today is to help you see the overall process, all four steps and to help you see how God uses this for good in your life, so that you can see the goodness of Jesus, so you can believe He's up to good things in your life, so your faith can grow, so that you can be thankful no matter where you're at in this process, so it can be Thanksgiving Day for you 365 days a year! So today we're just going to look at these four steps, one at a time as we go through this story. First, let's just read the story. Turn in your bibles to John 6:1-15. God's word says this:

*Some time after this, Jesus crossed to the far shore of the Sea of Galilee (that is, the Sea of Tiberias), and a great crowd of people followed him because they saw the miraculous signs he had performed on the sick. Then Jesus went up on a mountainside and sat down with his disciples. The Jewish Passover Feast was near. When Jesus looked up and saw a great crowd coming toward him, he said to Philip, "Where shall we buy bread for these people to eat?" He asked this only to test him, for he already had in mind what he was going to do. Philip answered him, "Eight months' wages would not buy enough bread for each one to have a bite!" Another of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, spoke up, "Here is a boy with five small barley loaves and two small fish, but how far will they go among so many?" Jesus said, "Have the people sit down." There was plenty of grass in that place, and the men sat down, about five thousand of them. Jesus then took the loaves, gave thanks, and distributed to those who were seated as much as they wanted. He did the same with the fish. When they had all had enough to eat, he said to his disciples, "Gather the pieces that are left over. Let nothing be wasted." So they gathered them and filled twelve baskets with the pieces of the five barley loaves left over by those who had eaten. After the people saw the miraculous sign that Jesus did, they began to say, "Surely this is the Prophet who is to come into the world." Jesus, knowing that they intended to come and make him king by force, withdrew again to a mountain by himself.*

- John 6:1-15

This passage is going to show us a four step process that leads to Thanksgiving, four steps or stages that God uses to build gratitude into our lives. Once you see this whole process, you can give thanks no matter where you are in it. Let's just go through these one steps, one at a time. Unfortunately the first one is:

## Problem

Yeah, I hate to be the bearer of bad news, but the very first step in Thanksgiving is often a problem! There's something we lack. There's something that is in danger of being taken away. There's something that's not right. There's a problem. John shows us the problem in the first several verses of this story. He starts with the setting in verses 1-4. Look at what he says:

*Some time after this, Jesus crossed to the far shore of the Sea of Galilee (that is, the Sea of Tiberias), and a great crowd of people followed him because they saw the miraculous signs he had performed on the sick. Then Jesus went up on a mountainside and sat down with his disciples. The Jewish Passover Feast was near.*

- John 6:1-4

So this is probably several months after Jesus healed the man at the pool of Bethesda. Jesus has once again left Jerusalem, and he is now in his home territory of Galilee in the Northern part of Israel. While Jesus is there, he's been doing lots of miracles. He's been healing people, giving sight to the blind, casting out demons. He's been doing all kinds of amazing works, and the crowds are getting bigger and bigger. Think about it this is before the electronic age. There's no CNN, no internet news, no photos. So if you want to see this guy who's doing these amazing things you're going to have to go and see him yourself. So people did. Hundreds and hundreds of people at a time, pressing in to see Jesus and ask for healing. The crowds just kept getting bigger.

Now eventually, Jesus and his disciples needed a break from the crowds. They were busy. They were worn out. Matthew tells us that Jesus had heard that his cousin, John the Baptist, had been executed. They needed to get away, so they got in a boat and they sailed across the Sea of Galilee.

Here's a map with the Sea of Galilee. It's not an actual ocean or saltwater sea. It's just a large freshwater lake, about eight miles across. Jesus and his disciples sailed from the highly populated, very Jewish western side of the lake to the sparsely populated, less Jewish, more deserty area in the northeast corner of the lake. It's an area of hill country, known today as the Golan Heights.

Jesus and his disciples all go there back up into the hills for some peace and quiet. You've all just spent a weekend with large boisterous crowds of relatives that you only see once or twice a year. You get the need for peace and quiet. So they go for peace and quiet. After they've been there for who knows how long - a few hours a day or two, we don't know - but after a short time the inevitable happens. Somebody sees them word gets around, and a huge crowd of Jews take that ten plus mile walk from the western side of the lake around the top to the desolate eastern shore, and they find Jesus.

Now John tells us here that it was about the time of the Feast of Passover. We need to know that, because it would have a huge impact on the situation. It would mean that people were

ready to take a break from work, so there were more people looking for something to do. It would mean that there were lots of pilgrims on the road headed to Jerusalem. Because of Passover, people would have been even more curious about Jesus.

Passover wasn't just a big religious holiday like Christmas. It was also a big National Holiday for the Nation of Israel. To the Jews, Passover was like our Fourth of July. It commemorated the time when the nation was born, the time when they were set free from Egypt. It commemorated a time when Israel wandered in desert places, like the one Jesus and his disciples were in now. It commemorated a time when God did miracles, when he parted the Red Sea and when he miraculously gave them water when they needed it, and when God miraculously provided bread. If you remember the story, when Israel wandered through the desert this stuff called "manna" would miraculously appear every morning on the ground and the Israelites made it into bread and ate it.

So God had done all these things for Israel during the time commemorated by the Feast of Passover, and he did them all through their leader Moses. Moses was a great Prophet and Teacher and a miracle worker. He was the leader of the nation of Israel. The people revered him. When he died, one of the last prophecies he made was that God would eventually raise up from the nation of Israel another prophet and teacher and miracle worker like himself. Moses prophesied that God would raise this man up, and he would lead the nation.

That's the promise that Moses had made his last prophecy, but it had never been fulfilled. Despite all the great leaders and prophets that Israel had produced everyone in Israel agreed that this great prophet, who would later be called the Messiah, had never arisen. But every year at Passover when they remembered the Exodus, when they remembered the bread, when they remembered Moses, they wondered if this might be the year that the prophecy came true.

Now all of this - Jesus' miracles, the people being off of work, the longing for this great prophet - all of this came together to produce a very curious, very motivated, very large crowd that had followed Jesus from one side of the lake to the other. John says here that it was "a great crowd." That's an understatement! John tells us that there were 5,000 men. Matthew tells us that there were women and children beside, so that most scholars estimate the size of the crowd to be about 20,000 people. Now that is a big crowd! That's a lot of curiosity! A lot of popularity. A lot of loyalty. It probably would have made Jesus and his disciples very excited, except for one thing. There was a serious problem: Look at verse 5.

*When Jesus looked up and saw a great crowd coming toward him, he said to Philip, "Where shall we buy bread for these people to eat?"*

- John 6:5

You now have 20,000 people coming toward you. They are patriotically wound up. They have walked ten-plus miles to get there. They are in the middle of nowhere, and no one thought to call Chick-Fil-A! That's a problem! Jesus asks Philip what they should do, because he's from the

area so he would know what was and wasn't available. But Philip's response is not encouraging! Look at v.6

*He asked this only to test him, for he already had in mind what he was going to do.*

- John 6:6

So apparently Jesus knew more than it seems. Look at Philip's response:

*Philip answered him, "Eight months' wages would not buy enough bread for each one to have a bite!"*

- John 6:7

Philip is saying "Hey! This is 20,000 people! It would take a half-year's wages for a common laborer for them to have even one mouthful! Plus there's the whole question of where you're going to find someone to cater for 20,000 people with no notice! Then Andrew chimes in in v.8

*Another of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, spoke up, "Here is a boy with five small barley loaves and two small fish, but how far will they go among so many?"*

- John 6:8-9

Now, we don't know if that was all the food that the crowd had, but it was all the disciples could come up with while the crowd was coming. What the disciples are saying is "We have a problem! A big problem!"

Now, I want you to notice some really interesting things about this problem. First, the problem came about because the disciples were following Jesus! They weren't in a jam because they had been disobedient! They weren't running from God. These are Jesus' disciples! If they had not been following Jesus, they would never have had a hungry mob of 20,000 people coming toward them in the desert! It was obedience to Jesus that got them into this mess.

Notice secondly that there is no natural solution to their problem. They are not going to solve this on their own! Andrew has added up the sum total of their resources, and it comes to one Happy Meal! It's not even a good Happy Meal at that! This kid has five barley-like biscuits, which was the food of the poor, and two small fish. I don't mean small fish I mean really small fish, like the kind Ricky Tharrington catches when you go fishing with him! So this isn't a happy meal with fries. It's like the one with apple slices. It's a Sad Meal! Then Philip tells them there's no way they are going to buy enough food out there in the middle of nowhere with no money! They got into this by following Jesus, and there's no natural solution at all!

Thirdly notice this: Jesus wants them to feel the problem! Did you notice that? He wants them to feel the pinch, the squeeze, the discomfort of this moment. John says he already knew what he was going to do. He could have just done it without even letting them know there was a problem! Or he could have not fed the people and just disappeared. He did that in other situations. But that's not what he does. He sits the disciples down and says "Now, this is

interesting! Our service to God has landed us in a problem! We have 20,000 hungry people to feed, and we don't have the resources within ourselves to feed them! Our little Happy Meal's not going to do the trick!" Jesus wants them to feel the problem. There's a problem.

Can I tell you something? If you follow Jesus wholeheartedly, if you make him Lord of your life, if you say "yes" to the things Jesus calls you to do, eventually there's going to be a problem. Your following of Jesus is going to get you into trouble, because Jesus is going to lead you to a problem that's bigger than you! Some of you are right there right now in your lives. You were following Jesus, and he led you to a problem that you can't fix on your own.

Some of you are saying "I don't know I was walking with Jesus. When I started this business I thought he called me to do this and now I don't know how on earth I'm going to make payroll." I was walking with Jesus. I thought he wanted me to mention my faith at work. Now there's this hostility with my boss, and I can't fix it." I was walking with Jesus, and I took on this ministry, and it's so much bigger than me, and I don't have the resources to do it on my own." Maybe it's even your sin. Maybe you're going I was walking with Jesus and I became more and more aware of my sin. Now it bothers me, and I don't seem to be able to overcome it. Some of you are there at the Problem. If you're not there right now, but you choose to follow Jesus, really follow him, at some point you're going to be there.

So step 1 is Problem. Following Jesus gets the disciples into a problem. But luckily, that's not the last step! Step 2 is:

## **Preparation**

Having pointed out that there is a giant problem, Jesus goes on to do something that from an earthly standpoint makes no sense at all. It's actually kind of shocking., Look at what he does:

*Jesus said, "Have the people sit down." There was plenty of grass in that place, and the men sat down, about five thousand of them. Jesus then took the loaves, gave thanks, and distributed to those who were seated as much as they wanted. He did the same with the fish.*

- John 6:8-9

Notice what Jesus does here. He seats them all for a picnic! He tells everyone to sit down like they are going to eat! Mark's gospel tells us that Jesus had the disciples seat the crowd in groups of 50 and 100, so this feels very organized like something is definitely going to happen. By the way, that's how we got the number 5,000. They counted! But notice that he seats everyone to eat! I say this is shocking, because all this is going to do is raise the expectations of the crowd. This is now no longer a private matter of a few rumbling stomachs. People are going to expect something!

Then he goes on to hold up the biscuits and sardines and give thanks! He says the blessing! Like this is the meal we're all going to eat! From a human standpoint it's ridiculous! 20,000 people one happy meal! Let me give you a comparison to help you feel what this would be like. When we lived in Zimbabwe, there were times when you just could not get fuel for your car. It just wasn't to be found for any price. Well, this is like me telling 500 cars to line up, because I've found 1 cup of gasoline! Like that's going to solve the problem! It's ridiculous!

Why on earth is Jesus doing this? He's getting ready for God to provide. Remember how in last week's passage Jesus said he only did what the Father showed him to do? Well, verse 6 tells us that the Father must have shown Jesus what he was going to do. It says "Jesus already had in mind what he would do." The Father had shown Jesus that he was going to provide.

Can I tell you something? Sometimes you have to get ready for God to provide. Sometimes we need to step out in faith, as if God is going to do what we are asking him to do. Sometimes we need to act as if God is actually going to answer our prayer! Because sometimes we don't do that!

I can be the worst about acting like God's not going to move! I remember one time, years ago, we were getting ready for a Sunday Morning service. We were doing something a little different. I don't remember what it was, but I was worrying about it! (which will shock those of you who know me). I was saying "Well, I hope this doesn't go wrong, and I hope that doesn't go wrong. I just hope God shows up and blesses us. I remember one of the ladies who was on the worship team kind of looked at me and said "Why wouldn't he?" I realized "I'm acting as if God's not going to provide." Sometimes we act like God is waiting around the corner to pull the rug out from under us. Sometimes Jesus highlights the problem, and we're like "See, I knew it! I

knew God would let me down!” But the problem isn’t the end of the story. The story isn’t finished yet, and Jesus knows it. So he prepares for God to move.

Sometimes we have to step out on Faith. Sometimes we have to prepare for God to move. I’m not saying take out a second mortgage on your house and invest it in bitcoin! There’s common sense! But sometimes we need to prepare for God to move.

In England in the 1800’s, there was a famous Pastor named George Muller. He was incredible. He housed and fed in his lifetime over 10,000 orphans. He established over 100 schools, and he did it all by faith! The longer he walked with God, the bolder he got. I remember there was one story where he had a house with 300 hungry orphans in it and absolutely no food. The staff was at a complete loss. They asked him what they should do. He prayed about it. He said “Set the table and seat the children. God is going to provide breakfast. So the kids were all there, and he stepped to that empty table and said Grace. He blessed the meal just like the food was there! George Muller knew that sometimes you have to prepare for God to provide. Sometimes you’ve got to prepare for God to provide. That’s what happens in our story. There’s (1) Problem, (2) Preparation and:

## **Provision**

Look at what John tells us:

*Jesus then took the loaves, gave thanks, and distributed to those who were seated as much as they wanted. He did the same with the fish.*

- John 6:11

Jesus distributes generously, and the people have all they want. But he's not done. He wants the disciples to notice one more thing. Look at:

*When they had all had enough to eat, he said to his disciples, "Gather the pieces that are left over. Let nothing be wasted." So they gathered them and filled twelve baskets with the pieces of the five barley loaves left over by those who had eaten.*

- John 6:12-13

God provides, and God provides generously! The disciples pick up the leftovers, and there are 12 baskets from this 1 Happy Meal! I've always wondered "Why 12 baskets? Why does John point that out? Is it one for each tribe of Israel? Why 12?" Then I realized "Oh, one for each disciple!" Each of Jesus' 12 Disciples gets a doggie bag as his personal reminder of God's generosity!

Can I just tell you something? We serve a generous God! A God with more than enough resources for his people! A God who invites us to come to him and depend on him for our provision!

Look at the way he provides here! Jesus literally gives them bread from Heaven! They go from 20,000 hungry people and one tiny lunch to 20,000 full people and 12 baskets of food left over! They're better off in the end than they were before the problem ever happened! We serve a generous God, a God who delights to meet the needs of his people in a generous and sometimes dramatic fashion.

That's what happened to George Muller, the Pastor at the orphanage in England. He stepped up to that completely empty table to say Grace. No sooner had he finished praying then there was a knock at the door and a local baker said he couldn't sleep the night before and felt that God had told him to bake several batches of bread that morning for the children. As he left, there was another knock and a man who had a milk-wagon said his wagon had just broken down on the street in front of the orphanage and that the milk was going to spoil and could the children possibly use it?

Listen, that's a true story! But you need to know something: God's generosity is not just for the 12 Disciples. It's not just for people like George Muller. God's generosity is for us, and He's writing his own faith stories in lives like yours and mine right now, if we will just step out on faith and follow him and do what he calls us to do. You know in a couple of weeks, on

December 9, we're going to have our annual church potluck and business meeting. In preparation for that, the Lead Team has been working on next year's budget and working with our finances. Can I tell you something? We serve a generous God! When we formed this church, we felt like God was calling us to step out on faith and depend on God's generosity. Most Church plants start out with support from other churches. They raise funds. We didn't have that, but we still felt like God was calling us to exercise faith and give a good portion of our income to missions. I thought I heard God say "20%" but the Lead Team said "No No, we're pretty sure we heard 25%!" So we give this 25% to missions.

We had our budget meeting the other night and looked at our balances, and I won't spoil the surprise you'll hear it on the 9<sup>th</sup>. We were all shocked! God has been very, very good to this church financially! He's been so generous to us through you. Can I ask you "Have we pressured you to give? Do we twist your arm?" No! God has just met our little tiny step of faith with abundant generosity! We serve a generous God! He's still writing faith stories! He's got your situation whatever it is, whatever your need is, whatever the problem is, he's got it covered.

(1) Problem (2) Preparation (3) Provision. Now we're not done yet there's one more step:

## Praise

As a result of God's provision through Jesus, people give thanks. They praise him. Look at: verses 14-15

*After the people saw the miraculous sign that Jesus did, they began to say, "Surely this is the Prophet who is to come into the world." Jesus, knowing that they intended to come and make him king by force, withdrew again to a mountain by himself.*

- John 6:14-15

The people look around them. They see the wilderness setting. They see the bread and hear the teaching of Jesus. They recognize that he, Jesus, is the one that Moses promised, the prophet, the miracle worker, teacher like Moses that would come into the world, the Messiah. They recognize it so strongly that Jesus had to withdraw from them, because he knew that in their Passover excitement they would declare that they had a new King and Rome would crush them. But the crowd praises Jesus!

The disciples praise him! They are amazed at what the Father has done through Jesus in this moment that went from problem to preparation to provision, and they praise Jesus for it in all their writings! This is the only one of Jesus' miracles that is in all four gospels! This faith story must have been told again and again, wherever the disciples went!

But I want you to notice something and this is important: No one would have been praising anyone if Jesus hadn't exposed them to the problem. Do you see that? If there hadn't ever been a problem, everyone would have taken God's provision for granted. If Jesus had solved the problem without letting anyone feel it, no one would have known enough to be thankful.

Jesus invites the Disciples to this life of Thanksgiving. He lets them experience a problem, because they are following him. He lets them know the problem cannot be solved by their own resources. He prepares and then he lets God provide. That is what brings the praise.

That's the secret to having Thanksgiving 365 Days a year: Knowing that it's the problem that leads to the praise. So no matter where we are at in this cycle we can praise God for his goodness! And you know what? The bigger the problem, the bigger the praise. Jesus led them into the problem, so that he could lead them into the praise. He helped them see God's goodness, so they could learn to rely on it.

1) Problem, 2) Preparation, 3) Provision, 4) Praise. No matter where you're at you can give thanks to God, because He uses it all for your good.