

THE LORD KNOWS HOW TO STRENGTHEN OUR FAITH
He destroys all faith in ourselves -- He reveals the faithfulness of His Word.

John 6:1-15

TEXT: *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.*

In Jesus' name, fellow redeemed:

What kind of a test is it that we would give to ourselves? Not much of a test! While we might push ourselves to the limit, we can never know what we are capable of doing unless we are pushed beyond the limit. A test that pushes us beyond what we perceive to be our own limitations is a test that strengthens us and makes us better. We need coaches for that.

Those of you who have had surgeries or conditions that have required a stay in a rehabilitation unit know what it feels like to be pushed beyond your perceived limitations. If you would have been sent home without rehabilitation exercises, you would not have recovered fully. They push you beyond what you would have pushed yourself, and you got stronger and better.

The Lord treats His Chosen Ones in this same manner. THE LORD KNOWS HOW TO STRENGTHEN OUR FAITH, so that I. We despair of our own hopes; and II. Learn to place our trust in Him.

Look at how the Lord worked to train His own disciples in faith! A great crowd of people had been following Jesus because of *the miraculous signs he had performed on the sick*. The crowd numbered some 5000 men. Matthew's account also adds that this 5000 men did not include the women and children. There could have been nearly 10,000 men, women and children there!

The situation reached a critical point when this massive crowd was dangerously far-removed from any source of sustenance. The Bible says: *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?"* Here is a very real problem! And Jesus turns to His disciples to solve it!

The Bible says: *Philip answered him, "eight months' wages would not buy enough bread for each one to have a bite!"* Based on today's minimum wage Philip is suggesting that \$10,000 won't offer them even a bite of food! A pretty good estimate, but still not enough. And they didn't have that kind of money, nor were they anywhere near a fast-food joint that might offer them hamburgers for a dollar. Andrew then spoke up: *"Here is a boy with five small barley loaves and two small fish, but how far will they go among so many?"* A ridiculous suggestion. Obviously, Andrew was stating the hopelessness of the situation. And that's exactly what the Lord wanted his disciples to recognize!

This is typical of the kind of situations the Lord loves to use in order to make us despair of our own hopes, our own strengths, and our own wisdom. And because we are also His disciples, we also have a Lord Jesus who loves to use such situations to test our faith.

There before us is the world of sin and unbelief, and Jesus says to us, "You feed them!" Go! Preach the Gospel to all the world! And how hopeless it may seem to us, the tiny WELS, when God hands us the responsibility of preaching the Gospel to all the world! Who are we among so many!

How useless it may seem to us as a congregation to put so much time and money into a LES with the

hope that some might be kept close to Jesus and be saved!

How desperate it may seem to our families in this current national economic crisis when fathers are losing their jobs, our hopes for a comfortable retirement are gone, and our elderly are being threatened by a government who is planning to counsel everyone 65 and older on how to end our lives with dignity!

And on a more personal note, how helpless and hopeless it must feel for those upon whose shoulders the Lord lays the heavy cross of sickness, incurable disease, and weaknesses with no reasonable hope in sight!

But this is the same Jesus who tested His disciples 2000 years ago to make them see and feel hopeless so that He might reveal His almighty power and amazing grace.

As it was then, so it is today: ***he already had in mind what he was going to do.*** Jesus was going to reveal His faithfulness to His Word.

Those who do not know God's Word are seriously handicapped at this point for without God's Word there is nothing for them to believe. For example, Jesus has taught us to pray: ***Give us this day our daily bread...*** but few actually know what it means. More do not believe it, nor do they pray it. And people like us who have learned what it means, and believe it, regularly forget and fail to trust it. So it is for our good that our Lord teaches us to trust His promises through tests, trials and adversities.

Peter said it best: what we have is not going to do it! ***Here is a boy with five small barley loaves and two small fish, but how far will they go among so many?*** Yet, by pointing out the obvious (***how far will they go among so many?***) is Andrew possibly hinting that Jesus might do something with these few elements? I think so. Aren't our own feeble prayers often prayed with that mixture of faith and uncertainty. But even a hint of faith is still faith! And what a wonderful thing faith in Jesus is! Faith in Jesus is NEVER disappointed! Paul points this truth out when he writes: ***... hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what he already has? But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently. In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express. And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints in accordance with God's will.*** Ro 8 So pray! The Holy Spirit Himself takes our feeble prayers, our sighs and pleas and reworks them to fit the will of God!

Let me emphasize the word "FOR" in that passage. What God does FOR US is the essence of the Gospel. He lived FOR us, keeping the Law of God FOR us. He died FOR us and paid the price of sin FOR us. And now His Holy Spirit even intercedes FOR us, taking our feeble prayers to God's glorious throne.

The Bible says: ***Jesus said, "Have the people sit down." ... 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.*** I often wondered: What did this look like? Did the two small fish suddenly turn into a massive pile of broiled fish before their very eyes? Did they place the five loaves into a basket that over-flowed and never emptied? The Bible doesn't say. The fact is, however, that everyone had more than enough to eat. And instead of miraculously producing just enough for everyone, Jesus produced more than what was needed so that His disciples had to get to work and pick up the pieces that were left over!

What a lesson! And what a parallel we have in the miracle that takes place right before our very eyes and hearts in the Lord's Supper. The first time Jesus distributed the Lord's Supper, it was before the eyes of these same disciples who had witnessed this Feeding of the Five Thousand. On that last Passover the night before Jesus would die for the sins of the world, He gave them bread and wine and said, ***"This is my body; this is my blood..."*** None of them would doubt for a moment that the One who multiplied the loaves and fishes could also give them His actual body and blood, in, with and under the bread and wine they would eat and drink that evening. They had seen enough to trust WHATEVER this Jesus would say to them.

And so shall we! Every morning when you get up, you can expect Jesus to be faithful to His Word. Now and then He will test you in order to strengthen your faith. It will be a test that causes you to lose all hope in yourself and your fellow man. But before you stands the only hope that is in Jesus' gracious Word and Promise. Hold to that and you will not be disappointed, and your faith will be strengthened. Amen.