

The Problem Is Too Big; The Provision Is Too Small

Written by Bob Stone

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I'm sure at least one time in all our lives we have said, "The problem is too big and/or the provision is too small." (You don't have to tell the story, recall a circumstance when you went through something like that.)

If you know your Bible, I'm sure you know what happened when Jesus had a large crowd of people following Him. Let's watch our Lord's responses and see if we might match His attitude and methods on how to respond when the problem is too big and/or the provision is too small. I want you to picture the scene as I read from John 6:1-15. (See also Matthew 14:13-21.)

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."

The Problem Is Too Big; The Provision Is Too Small

Written by Bob Stone

Jesus, knowing that they intended to come and make him king by force, withdrew again to a mountain by himself.

The landscape

Matthew 14:13 and John 6:3 give us the verbal picture of this scene. Matthew 14:13 says, *"...he (Jesus) withdrew by boat privately to a solitary place. Hearing of this, the crowds followed him on foot from the towns."*

John 6:3 records:

"Then Jesus went up on a mountainside and sat down with his disciples."

It is a beautiful sloping mountainside, in the background the Sea of Galilee. Later we will read that there was plenty of grass at this spot.

The excitement of the crowd was also growing because according to Matthew 14:14, *"When Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, he had compassion on them and healed their sick."*

The amount of people present was quite large: about 5,000 men plus women and children. There might have been 10,000 people there.

The Lord's response

The Problem Is Too Big; The Provision Is Too Small

Written by Bob Stone

At a point in time on the mountain, Jesus wanted to give them all a potluck meal, or at least a snack.

John 6:5 says, *"When Jesus looked up and saw a great crowd coming towards 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?"

It is disconcerting, but in Israel about 20 miles from the spot where this happened, you will find a McDonald's. When Nancy and I drove by it, it seemed so out of place I stopped and took a picture of it.

Now as we can see, the question asked by Jesus in John 6:6 was really a test for Philip.

The parallel passage in Matthew gives us some different details of this event:

"As evening approached, the disciples came to him and said, 'This is a remote place, and it's already getting late. Send the crowds away, so that they can go to the villages and buy themselves some food.' Jesus replied, 'They do not need to go away. You give them something to eat.' 17] 'We have here only five loaves of bread and two fish,' they answered."

The Problem Is Too Big; The Provision Is Too Small

Written by Bob Stone

Jesus' solution to a situation where the problem is too big and the provision is too small is found in Matthew 14:18—*"Bring them [the boy's lunch] here to me,"* He said.

Review of the story

Let's take some time to study this in detail. What is the key to the whole story according to John 6:9?

"Here is a boy with five small barley loaves and two small fish..."

Why do you think he hadn't eaten the lunch? It's remarkable. Have you been camping when it's time to eat? That mountain air seems to make me all the more hungry. If this boy had been a typical kid today, the all-day-long mountain hunger would have caused him to eat that lunch by now.

Why was his lunch chosen? It appears his mom was the only one who thought enough in advance to provide a lunch for her son. Remember, this whole meeting on the side of the mountain wasn't planned; it was spontaneous. A lot of ministry and challenges are not planned and do not fit our schedule or resources, but we have to be ready anyway.

So what's the principle of provision? It's very simple; don't miss it! The problem was big, but the boy was able to provide a solution because **he gave even the very little he had to Jesus**. Many people want to commit who they are and what they have to Jesus. They have emotion and tears. When it

The Problem Is Too Big; The Provision Is Too Small

Written by Bob Stone

comes to the actual handing over of their whole lives and all they possess, however, it never happens because they are unwilling or think it is too small.

Again we see how a child can teach us adults a lot about the solutions to our problems. People who work with kids see these kinds of object lessons all the time. (This, by the way, is why some of you need to work with kids. When we are with children, we will often be taught lessons about ourselves and life.)

The results

I want us to see that significant things happened because of this boy's little gift. We'll go back in a moment and see what Jesus did with the lunch, but first notice the *results* of what He did with the lunch.

First, all are "satisfied."

Matt. 14:20—*"They all ate and were satisfied, and the disciples picked up twelve basketfuls of broken pieces that were left over."*

All four gospels record that everyone ate until they were satisfied. Don't miss the obvious lesson or encouragement: a boy's willingness to give satisfied the hunger for up to 10,000 people. The lesson here is so important: there are great benefits for many on the other side of our obedience and generosity—2 Cor. 8:13-15.

When we are willing to give what we have to minister to someone else, we will see our *littl*

The Problem Is Too Big; The Provision Is Too Small

Written by Bob Stone

e multiplied—in unbelievable proportions—in satisfaction and relief.

The mathematics of this scene in Matthew 14 may be typical if we were able to see the long term results of our obedience. (Optional Study: 2 Cor. 9:6-15; Phil. 4:14-19. What was the harvest?)

Second, there was a "surplus" after the distribution.

Matt. 14:20—*"They all ate and were satisfied, and the disciples picked up twelve basketfuls of broken pieces that were left over."*

Why was there a surplus? Again we go back to the apparent willingness of this boy to give what he had to Jesus. Second Corinthians 9:10-11 indicates the same answer: *"Now he who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will also supply and increase your store of seed and will enlarge the harvest of your righteousness. You will be made rich in every way so that you can be generous on every occasion, and through us your generosity will result in thanksgiving to God."*

The key phrase in verse 11 is *"...your generosity..."*

Little in God's hands not only brings immediate satisfaction, but a generated surplus for future needs.

Lives and things given to Jesus keep on giving!

The Problem Is Too Big; The Provision Is Too Small

Written by Bob Stone

Third, Jesus was recognized as a "sovereign."

John 6:14-15—*"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."*

If we look at this we can see their timing was off, but their recognition was not. The point is: the glory, the honor and the united enthusiasm of the crowd was touched off by a boy's willingness to hand over his lunch to the hands of Jesus. Isn't that amazing?

Did you notice the boy didn't get the acclamation? Do you know why? Matthew 5:16 gives us the answer:

"In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven."

When we give our little to Jesus and don't attempt to receive credit or praise, others will praise our Father in heaven (2 Cor. 9:12-13).

A Current Application of the Story

What does this say to us?

First, this story gives insight into the *affluent* as well as the *needy* heart of a modern Christian.

What was the disciples' initial and human response to the hunger of the crowd? It is the same response that many Christians have today. We offer excuses like the ones we see in this passage.

1. **The conditions are too difficult:** "*...it's a remote place...*"—Matt. 14:15a. In other words, the conditions are insurmountable. Let's take world hunger as an example. What's our typical response? ("The people are too far away." "The transportation is inadequate." "The agriculture, the government, the drought problems, etc., are too big for anyone to do any good!" Whenever the problem is too big and the provision seems small, whether the problem is worldwide in scope or a personal sin problem, we all have a tendency to make excuses like the disciples.

2. **It's too late:** "*It's getting late...*"—Matt. 14:15b. "We can't do anything about it."

3. **It's not enough:** "*We have only five loaves and two fish*"—Matt. 14:17; "*...how far will this go among so many?*"—John 6:9. We all can feel inadequate when we look at how large our problems might be, but there are three perspectives I want us to keep in mind:

The Problem Is Too Big; The Provision Is Too Small

Written by Bob Stone

We are only sufficient in Christ. 2 Cor. 12:9—*"But he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.' Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me."*

We are to minister in His resources, not from our human perspective and abilities. 2 Cor. 8:1-5—*"And now, brothers, we want you to know about the grace that God has given the Macedonian churches. Out of the most severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity. For I testify that they gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability. Entirely on their own, they urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the saints. And they did not do as we expected, but they gave themselves first to the Lord and then to us in keeping with God's will."*

1. **It's going to cost too much:** *"Eight months wages would not buy enough bread for each one to have a bite"* —John 6:7.

2. **They can and will have to take care of themselves:** *"Send the crowds away, so they can go to the villages and buy themselves some food"*
—Matt. 14:15c (James 2:15-16). Many today are saying the same thing by their actions and attitudes: "I can't handle, or I don't need to handle the problems of others (like the hungry); they can and should take care of their own problem." The reality is, some

can

handle their own problems—2 Thess. 3:6-13. On the other hand, the truth is that some of our needs—as well as those of others—are too great, too complex, too widespread, for any one person to take care of.

Again, let's look at the world hunger example. Many are unable to do much about their situation because most of the hungry are victims of drought; of religions that don't allow them to eat some of the food that is available (e.g., it's sacred); of war; of hostile environments and governments.

But let me remind us all how shortsighted it is to think of the answer from our perspective. In the feeding of the 5,000, the answer to the problem was already in our

The Problem Is Too Big; The Provision Is Too Small

Written by Bob Stone

Lord's mind, but not in the disciples'.

John 6:6-7—"*...he said to Philip, 'Where shall we buy bread for these people to eat?'*
6] *He asked this only to test him, for he already had in mind what he was going to do.*
7] *Philip answered him, "Eight months' wages would not buy enough bread for each one to have a bite!"*

The application is obvious: many of the big problems (financial, relational) we face are a test. Philip failed his test; but will we?

Another question we need to ask is, "How does Jesus see our situation?" Doesn't it make sense that something may look impossible to us, but be possible with God? Jesus models what our attitude should be, saying,

"They do not need to go away"—Matt. 14:16a, and

- *"You give them something to eat"*—v. 16b

We can conclude that more often than not, we have the means to take care of many of our problems if we follow this boy's actions, giving the little we have to Jesus and involving Him in the process.

Listen to the Lord's heart. Is this our attitude toward the needy? *"I have compassion on these people; they have already been with me three days and have nothing to eat. I do not*

The Problem Is Too Big; The Provision Is Too Small

Written by Bob Stone

want to send them away hungry, or they may collapse on the way"
—Matt. 15:32. We need to ask ourselves, "Do we see what Jesus sees when the problem is too big and the provision is too small?"

Second, this story may give us insight into the process of meeting the physical and spiritual needs in our life as well as the world.

This passage doesn't explicitly teach the following. You can take or leave these observations. But it can, by inference, give us a few ideas that might be helpful when the problems are too big in our life and the lives of others. Notice the sequence (compare with 2 Cor. 8-9).

1. **First, we see the collection of sacrificial gifts**—vv. 17-18. *"We have here only five loaves of bread and two fish," they answered. "Bring them here to me," He said.* They first had to collect what they had. Likewise, when the need is great today, we are going to have to willingly sacrifice what we have to bring it to the table. It could be time, wisdom, ministry, finances, or all of the above.

Again, if we use world hunger as an example, the principle is we must live simpler, so those who have nothing can simply live—2 Cor. 8:13-15. We must place what we have in God's hands.

It makes no difference how insignificant it may seem; little is much with God. We should learn from this incident not to despise small gifts, because our Lord multiplies them.

Here are some simple goals when we face big needs around us, whether they are our problems or others'. We need to find a way to get a lot of little lunches together—2 Cor. 9:7. We need to sincerely and prayerfully ask: "Where can we buy or get bread so that these may eat?" We need to be disciples who will look for and collect a lot of lunches (care for the needy). The guidelines for such collection is found in 1 Cor. 16:1-4—*"Now about the collection for God's people: Do what I told the Galatian churches to do. On the first day of every week, each one of you should set aside a sum of money in keeping with his income, saving it up, so that when I come no collections will have to be made. Then, when I arrive, I will give letters of introduction to the men you approve and send them with your gift to Jerusalem. If it seems advisable for me to go also, they will accompany me."*

The Problem Is Too Big; The Provision Is Too Small

Written by Bob Stone

1. **Second, we can observe the wise distribution and management of those gifts**—Mark 6:39-44. The distribution was to be carried out by the disciples from beginning to end—Matt. 14:19c. Its management was to be carried out in a specific fashion: they were to divide up those who had the need into smaller and more manageable groups of 50 to 100—Luke 9:14; Mark 6:14.

Think about what we see here and note the wisdom in this distribution and management; there were some built-in safeguards here. We are sure there was no abuse or stealing of goods, because Christians were handling the distribution. (Yes, a Judas can be involved, but that is not the norm. Note: Only give to relief organizations where you are assured of this kind of care—strict guidelines for storage and distribution—with nothing squandered or wasted.)

Because many believers were involved, the task did not become overwhelming.

1. **Third, we can see that care was given in the conservation of the gifts/food and also in the collection of leftovers.** v. 20—*"They all ate and were satisfied, and the disciples picked up twelve basketfuls of broken pieces that were left over."* I think it's apparent that the Lord was concerned about wasting His provisions. John 6:12 says,
"Gather up the fragments left over, that nothing be lost."
Why? This was consecrated food! Whatever we give in ministry, whether time, skills, gifts, or finances, we need to conserve the results and the surplus, so that our gifts can keep on giving (providing long-term help). When we are giving to others who have great needs, we need to also teach recipients to provide for themselves and others, too! (See 2 Cor. 8:14.)

The Problem Is Too Big; The Provision Is Too Small

Written by Bob Stone

This whole miracle is an illustration of who Jesus is and what He came to do. Don't miss that! (See John 6:21-58.) **He is the bread of heaven!** In John 6:51 Jesus said, *"I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. This bread is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world."*

1. **Fourth, we see that significant spiritual ministry accompanied the distribution of food** —Matt 14:14; 2 Cor. 9:8,11b-15. This marriage between physical and spiritual ministry cannot be separated. These accounts in the gospels show us that *surrounding* the feeding of the 5,000 was teaching and the healing of diseases—Matt. 14:14; 15:29-31. In our everyday life and around the world, we need Christian folks who will take minimal provisions and will pray over them as Jesus did, so that they will multiply. We need to make sure significant teaching and Christian community accompanies all ministry to the physical needs of people.

We need average people as well as missionaries, doctors, pharmacists, health care workers, dentists, teachers, nurses and agricultural experts who not only understand how to meet the physical needs of the people, but who understand the power of God. We need to see people who not only feed and care for the children, adults and the needy—the abused, mistreated, poor and troubled, but our world needs people who will be so filled with the Holy Spirit that they will pray for the healing of those they care for.

Let me read Matthew 14:13-21 again as we come to our application of this passage. Read Matthew .

The Problem Is Too Big; The Provision Is Too Small

Written by Bob Stone

When Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, he had compassion on them and healed their sick. As evening approached, the disciples came to him and said, "This is a remote place, and it's already getting late. Send the crowds away, so that they can go to the villages and buy themselves some food."

Jesus replied, "They do not need to go away. You give them something to eat." "We have here only five loaves of bread and two fish," they answered.

"Bring them here to me," he said. And he directed the people to sit down on the grass. Taking the five loaves and the two fish and looking up to heaven, he gave thanks and broke the loaves. Then he gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the people. They all ate and were satisfied, and the disciples picked up twelve basketfuls of broken pieces that were left over.

The number of those who ate was about five thousand men, besides women and children.

Application

I want us to get the application of this amazing miracle. What will bring about this kind of response? The secret is hidden in this story. If the world is ever going to be fed physically and spiritually, many will have to go through the same process as this bread did.

Here's the sequence:

1. The boy handed over his lunch
2. the Lord took it
3. gave thanks for it

The Problem Is Too Big; The Provision Is Too Small

Written by Bob Stone

4. broke it
5. and gave it out.

The result was that thousands were fed, rejoicing in God and wanting to make Jesus their king. I submit to you *this is a picture of the process that all who are used of God must go through*.

What are the steps?

He calls for help (and He also offers help).

For today's crowd Jesus says, "Where shall I find bread that these may eat?" As with Philip and Andrew, this is our test. How will we respond? Will we make excuses, or will we offer ourselves and our resources? The Lord is looking for a boy, a man, a woman, who will give all they possess to Him.

Next, as we commit ourselves, He takes—Matt. 14:19.

He receives what we offer of ourselves—our needs, sins, hurts and pain. There may, of course, be some dialogue about who packed your lunch; who put some of the ingredients into your life. Is the hurt and pain from your parents? Is it from your own sin? Is it from abuse or trauma inflicted by someone who did evil to you? Whatever the case, He receives the "whole lunch" as it is.

No matter how insignificant we may feel, as we give our problems, resources, or needs to Him, He takes it into His hands.

The Problem Is Too Big; The Provision Is Too Small

Written by Bob Stone

He gives thanks for us, as He gave thanks and blessed the bread.

In other words, as we yield ourselves to Him, He holds us in His hands and gives thanks for us. He holds us up to the Father and says, "Father, make the person equal to the task I have set before them. Multiply their talents, abilities and opportunities." Or He might say, "Father, forgive them of their sins and their willful disobedience." He may, in essence, say, "Father, heal their hurts and pain; let them feel Your love and affirmation."

Then comes the most difficult step of all:

He breaks us like we are bread.

After we offer our stuff and needs to Him, from that point on we may find ourselves in sorrow, loss, adjustment, or in a difficult healing process. Things may go wrong for no apparent reason. We may even be tempted to cry, "Why should this happen to me? Why are you doing this to me, God?"

The answer is, He may be breaking the bread to feed to others—1 Cor. 1:3-4. Notice two things about the breaking:

The Problem Is Too Big; The Provision Is Too Small

Written by Bob Stone

1. First, it is done safely in His hands—John 10:27,28c. Just as ultimate healing comes to the hands of a surgeon, so in our Lord's hands, surgery and pain may precede our ultimate healing. If sin is involved in our lives, there may be consequences we will feel as a result, but the ultimate result of the confession and breaking is that we will be healed.

2. Second, realize the world is only fed with broken bread. We may be too proud or hard; we may have friendships or habits that need breaking. We may need a break from past failures; or to eradicate wrong desires from our lives. We may need the comfort that comes from our healing so we will have something to share with others who will also need to receive comfort (see 2 Corinthians 1).

That leads to the final step in the process. Thankfully, the breaking and suffering does end, and then...

He gives US!

We'll be given to be distributed as He wills, to those who need the bread from our lives, e.g., the lessons we have learned, the comfort we have received. With that potential in mind, I want us to think about the words that are used to describe Jesus' actions. Do they sound familiar?

Why would He take us through the process of taking, receiving, thanking, breaking and giving? Who has gone through it? This is what Jesus has done as an example. Luke 22:19—*"And he took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to them, saying, 'This is my body given for you.' Do this in remembrance of me."*

The truth is, we are following in our Lord's footsteps. Why must we go through it too? Because as we have already stated, the world is only fed with broken bread. Psalm 51:17—*"The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise."*

The Problem Is Too Big; The Provision Is Too Small

Written by Bob Stone

Are you willing to be broken and used of God?

Possibilities for Long-term Preparation

1. Consult [InterCristo](#) for long-term opportunities in ministry.
2. Prepare to be a tentmaker in health care in a third world country. Contact: Tentmakers International, Seattle, Washington.
3. Prepare to go as a medical missionary, or health care worker. Contact missions agencies/denominations for assistance and qualifications. Write to [YWAM](#)'s "Pacific and Asia University" for information on health care in third world countries.
4. Contact [YWAM](#) for information about their [Mercy Ships](#) .