

Unrealistic

Luke 9:10-17 | August 4, 2019 | Bryce Beale

Christians are not, at very bottom, realistic people.

Jesus was not realistic; Paul knew nothing of the attitude that is most commonly meant by that term.

When contemplating the future, the realist's eyes glance back at the past and ask, "Have I seen this before? If not, it can never be."

But why? Why should the past determine the future? Is God not free to act as he pleases in the present, regardless his historical acts?

Until the time that Jesus set the sole of his foot upon the Sea of Tiberius, no human had, as far as we know, ever walked upon the sea. The realistic thinker would have thought the deed impossible, mainly because it had not happened yet in history.

But we Christians revel in the impossible. "With man this is impossible," we say, "but with God all things are possible." What others consider natural laws are only the preferences of God repeated over and over by God with amazing consistency. So if the Creator, who has always in the past pulled objects down to earth by gravity, wished in the next minute to pull this pulpit up to the ceiling, who could object? Is it any harder for God to pull this pulpit up than down? No. Only, we are used to him pulling it down, so should he pull it the other way we would be surprised.

Yet this is the stuff Christianity is made of. Unrealistic happenings, supernatural intervention into the affairs of mankind. Those who deny God immediately stuff their imaginations into a very small box of physical possibilities; but we Christians are freethinkers. We can with all sincerity assume almost any happening being as possible as any other. Perhaps the remainder of this day will be a repeat of so many days before it, with the sun moving across the sky and then the moon taking its place; or, perhaps instead the Son of Man will break across the sky like lightning, summoning up to heaven his beloved in the twinkling of an eye.

That may seem unrealistic to the world, since it flies in the face of what we are accustomed to in nature; but why should what we are accustomed to have the final word? God is responsible for

those things we are accustomed to, and he may just as easily replace them with things we have never yet seen. After all, even those things we consider natural laws, like gravity, at first were simply miracles with no precedent. When a leaf falls today, we describe its fall by the law of gravity; but the first time a leaf in Eden fell from a tree and swayed its way down to the earth, no leaf had ever fallen before in that way. God simply decided it should fall, and it was, at that point in history, a miraculous happening that had never happened before.

What wonderful freedom, my brothers and sisters! Breathe in the air of hope and wonder. Our God, our Christ, is not hindered by his own habits; we are free to believe the worst conundrum solvable in a moment by a miraculous act of God, or a special exercise of his providence. He may do exactly as he pleases, free from the constraints of natural law or his former custom. Therefore we, his people, cannot be described by our culture's use of "realistic."

Jesus in fact means to teach this lesson to his early followers in our text for today.

LUKE 9:10-17

We know from the gospel of John that *Jesus* actually brought up the problem of feeding the crowds. John 6:5 reads, "Lifting up his eyes, then, and seeing that a large crowd was coming toward him, Jesus said to Philip, 'Where are we to buy bread, so that these people may eat?'" And in verse 6 we find this remarkable addition: "He said this to test him, for he himself knew what he would do."

Whatever else this feeding of the five thousand is, it is a test for the disciple of Jesus. The Savior meant it to be one for Philip at first, and he means it to be one for you today, if you are his follower.

Matthew and Mark both reveal that Jesus will, a short time after this, repeat the miracle of bread and fish for four thousand. And after doing so, he will prod his disciples about both incidents. When they forget to bring bread for a trip, Jesus presses them to get their eyes off of earthly bread and to realize the significance of the two feedings. Mark relates the incident in this way, in chapter 8:

Now they had forgotten to bring bread, and they had only one loaf with them in the boat. And he cautioned them, saying, “Watch out; beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and the leaven of Herod.” And they began discussing with one another the fact that they had no bread. And Jesus, aware of this, said to them, “Why are you discussing the fact that you have no bread? Do you not yet perceive or understand? Are your hearts hardened? Having eyes do you not see, and having ears do you not hear? And do you not remember? When I broke the five loaves for the five thousand, how many baskets full of broken pieces did you take up?” They said to him, “Twelve.” “And the seven for the four thousand, how many baskets full of broken pieces did you take up?” And they said to him, “Seven.” And he said to them, “Do you not yet understand?”¹

We have the bare event in our text, but we must go beyond the bare event: we must *understand* what the event means. Ah, and it is difficult for us! We are so easily weighed down with worldly cares, paychecks and debts and duties here, that to look into heaven, as Jesus does in our text, does not come naturally to us.

But by God’s grace it shall come spiritually to us. Let us then observe this text and pray that God would grant us the gift of faith—faith in his unrealistic power.

Realistic

This sort of faith is presented first by its lack in the disciples, before we are directed to such a faith itself. So turn your attention to those disciples and their realism, and then we will consider Jesus’ example.

The Twelve have only just returned from their preaching tour—verse 10, “On their return the apostles told him all that they had done.”—and you may remember that on this tour, the apostles were not permitted two of anything. They depended entirely for their provision on God’s daily care; and notice the first words of our text today: “On their return.” They had no money belt, no bread—how did they return? Why did they not perish? Because God provided bread for them. He used the hospitality of sons of

¹ Vv. 15-21 (ESV).

peace in each of the towns, yet it was truly God's provision. Not one of their hairs perished.

Now notice that at their return they relate what had happened to Jesus. They "told him all that they had done." I would not be surprised if this report included the many ways that God provided for their need. Time and time and time again God provided bread; over and over and over, though they had taken nothing with them, God gave them bread and bread and bread.

They are then prepared for the test that Jesus sets before them now. Jesus has just shown them that in his service, they ought not expect the usual. They need not be realistic in their ministry endeavors, because Jesus' power is more real than their realism. Like Israel in the wilderness, God rained bread, as it were, from heaven for them to eat—there is no longer any need for them to fixate upon earthly provision. They can and must think about bread, but only briefly, for the bulk of their attention must go to God's kingdom, not man's.

You'll notice this emphasis even in the task of Jesus at our passage's start—just as the disciples had been doing on their tour, Jesus, in verse 11, "spoke to [the crowds] of the kingdom of God and cured those who had need of healing."

The disciples have been prepared then for this test. And so, as John relates, Jesus asks Philip, "Where are we to buy bread, so that these people may eat?" Luke summarizes this conversation by leaving out the question, but the test is still quite present. Verse 12:

Now the day began to wear away, and the twelve came and said to him, "Send the crowd away to go into the surrounding villages and countryside to find lodging and get provisions, for we are here in a desolate place."

And Jesus offers the test in his reply: "You give them something to eat."²

Two commands are in competition at this point. The disciples have commanded Jesus, "Send the crowd away." But Jesus has commanded the disciples, "You give them something to eat." Here, a realistic approach to the situation has struck against an

² V. 13.

unrealistic one. The spirit of our age, unbelief, chinks against the unbreakable iron of Christ's word. Jesus knows the power of his Father, at work in himself through the Spirit; but do the disciples know that power? He tests them.

Note their realism—on the surface, we cannot find fault in their suggestions to Jesus. They are the kind we ourselves would probably have made! They are so realistic. In verse 12, Luke notes that “the day began to wear away.” Dinnertime is near. So the Twelve offer this reasonable command: “Send the crowd away to go into the surrounding villages and countryside to find lodging and get provisions, for we are here in a desolate place.” The region around Bethsaida was covered in green grass, but it was desolate in that it had no market, no merchants, no reasonable source of bread.

And always in the history of the Twelve's experience, if you are in the wilderness at evening time and want a meal, you must go into a town. That always happened before; how could anything different happen now?

When Jesus demands that they provide the food, they search their realistic storehouse of probable ideas to meet that demand. In verse 13, “[t]hey said, ‘We have no more than five loaves and two fish—unless we are to go and buy food for all these people.’”

It is good for Jesus that he, the helpless idealist, has these more mature thinkers to cool his imagination!

In the other gospels, the Twelve try to convince Jesus of his error by pointing out that not even two hundred denarii worth of bread could feed this crowd of five thousand men (verse 14 gives us that number), and so probably twenty thousand with the women and children. Two hundred denarii would be about two-thirds a yearly wage. The median household income in Evansville is \$36,000—so we might imagine the disciples saying, “Jesus, we could not do what you command us even if we spent \$20,000 on food.” If there were twenty-thousand persons present, that amount of money would allow only one dollar per person, not enough for each to get a little, as the Twelve point out in the other accounts.

Notice as well that the disciples at present only have five loaves of barley bread, and two fish—and these they got from a boy in the crowd. The disciples do not even have bread or fish of their own!

And the boy's small supply would hardly feed the Twelve themselves.

These disciples then have done the calculating and the budgeting and, from their quite realistic and natural perspective, Jesus' command cannot be fulfilled. They have been tested by Jesus, and he slides their graded quiz across the desk to them. On its top is written a large, red "C"—really they have failed the quiz, but as we will see, Jesus is a gracious Teacher. And the disciple's response is, after all, quite average. It is how most all of us tend to respond. We weigh the possibilities by what seems humanly possible, and so make our decisions.

But brothers and sisters, the point that Jesus wishes to make is that our realistic expectations are not realistic after all. They may have been realistic before Jesus entered into our lives, but now they have met their match and must bow to their Sovereign.

Just think of that fledgling church which Jesus plants upon the earth by his own blood, purchasing for himself his beloved; and after his resurrection and ascension to heaven, he sends the Holy Spirit to empower this small band of early Christians. That small band should have been dispersed. It is led by these feeble Twelve in our text today. It is hounded by the rulers of that age, and its members hunted by sword and by lion. False varieties of Christianity are quite quickly introduced into that small fellowship, to break it up from within, while the Jewish and Roman world smash their hammers against it, to break it from without. And most who adhered to the faith were the least in that society: slaves, women, and children. Realistically, Christianity should have been stomped out and disappeared in the dust clouds of history along with the myriad other religious ideas of the ancient Roman world.

But Jesus was in that early church.

Or consider those few who, in the thirteen, fourteen, and fifteen hundreds, faced off against the dominant but corrupted Medieval Catholic Church. There is Martin Luther, a single, lonely monk who reads the Scriptures and discovers there a world far different from the religious system he was in. But when he came to oppose that system and proclaim the kingdom of God in its original purity, nearly all the world bared its teeth against him. European powers were eager for his blood; meanwhile, a mass of peasants perverted Luther's teachings to justify their own violent revolt.

Pressures from without and from within should have stamped out the truth that had just then reappeared. That would have been the realistic conclusion of the Reformation.

But Jesus was present in the Reformation!

In the 1700s, with the shackles of a misguided church cast off, the Western world tried to put reason on the throne of God. The historical faith of Christ seemed destined for decline as people learned to think for themselves.

But Jesus was present in the West. And the Great Awakening shook a slumbering world, so that this country saw more souls turn to the Christ of Scripture than was previously imaginable.

And here we find ourselves today. Outside the church, the pressures are increasing. More and more our historic faith is deemed offensive as our culture distances itself from its religious past. The moral instruction of Jesus is no longer politically correct; the wheels of society are aligning in their opposition to Christ. And within the church, distractions seek to usurp the place of Christ and divide his people. Old Marxist ideas have dressed themselves as Christian—questions of identity and oppression and revolution—and rage against the authority of God’s word. At the same time, Christian leaders surrender to moral laxity or apostatize; others abuse their power and confirm the anti-authoritarian sentiments of the world.

But Jesus is present with his Church today!

The realistic consequence of our current state of affairs is bleak—but we Christians have never been a realistic people. The Son of David shall have the nations as his inheritance. The coldest sinners and the hardest rebels against heaven shall be broken and converted still; and we in all our infirmities shall be used to proclaim the kingdom of God in power.

Unrealistic

For yes, the Twelve in our passage are an example of the realism we must not have; but they are only the setting for the main character. Now Jesus shows what we must be, and gently leads us toward the faith he demands. The disciples are realistic; but Jesus is not, in the popular sense of the word.

We are tipped off to the extraordinary nature of Jesus already in the first two verses of our text:

On their return the apostles told him all that they had done. And he took them and withdrew apart to a town called Bethsaida. When the crowds learned it, they followed him, and he welcomed them and spoke to them of the kingdom of God and cured those who had need of healing.

Parallel accounts offer two reasons for Jesus' withdrawal with the Twelve. First, the disciples were so occupied with their work among the crowds that they did not even have time to eat. They were, in other words, probably nearing the point of burn out or exhaustion. But secondly, Matthew's account makes clear that this retreat into the wilderness happened just after Jesus learned of the death of his friend, John the Baptist. Jesus, as fully man, may have been burdened with this news.

Yet whatever the reasons for his departure to a desolate place, they do not prevent our Savior from showing his tenderness toward us. The crowds chase Jesus down, but when he sees them we read again in Matthew that Jesus felt compassion for them. They disrupt his rest; he is not bothered. As Luke puts it, he "welcomed them."

So already we see how different Jesus is from the ordinary.

But there is more of our example to be revealed in this test.

For when the disciples fail the test, Jesus maintains his confidence. Since they failed to meet his first command to feed the crowds, he offers them a smaller command more their size, in verse 14: "Have them sit down in groups of about fifty each." Jesus does not doubt that an impossibility is about to happen. He does not worry about violating a natural law; he does not calculate the probabilities. He knows he is the Son of God; he knows that his Father is greater than all. His faith is complete.

And whereas the Twelve, like the crowds, are too transfixed upon the notion of physical bread, Jesus has his interests elsewhere. Upon the crowds in compassion, as we have seen, but also see verse 16: "And taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven and said a blessing over them." He is not rushed or panicked due to the enormity of his circumstance. He takes time

to acknowledge his Father, who was always upon his mind. What a contrast to the disciples' worldly concerns!

And the outcome recorded in this text violates the laws of nature and contradicts every probability we could throw at it. With a mere five loaves and two fish, the crowds in verse 17 "all ate and were satisfied." And just to make sure we get the point, Luke adds, "And what was left over was picked up, twelve baskets of broken pieces."

Every cannon of realistic possibility was aimed at Jesus in that moment and in unison they were fired. But when the smoke cleared, the cannons of our calculation were all found to be ruined while Jesus himself stood in their midst, unscathed and confident.

That is our example!

In closing I would point you to perhaps the sweetest comfort of this remarkable text. For when you look upon so magnificent an example of faith, it would be easy to sink into despair. How can we ever attain to that example?

Notice the Twelve, those persons in the story we can most easily relate to. They did not obey their Master when he gave his first command to feed the crowds; so Jesus lowers the bar to their small faith and tells them just to have the crowds sit. And see what Luke is careful to record afterward in verse 15: "And they did so, and had them all sit down."

Jesus who will somehow divide loaves of bread into thousands of pieces has no need of these faltering servants. He could have dismissed them that moment with ease. Yet Jesus is not like that. He is determined that his Twelve will have a part in his kingdom work. They have failed the test, but they are not cut from the class.

When Jesus distributes the loaves, he makes sure to do so through his Twelve. Verse 16: Jesus says a blessing and, "[t]hen he broke the loaves and gave them to the disciples to set before the crowd."

Brothers and sisters, Jesus is still working in the world, still enacting the miracle of new birth in the souls of men and women,

still providing for his own by ceaseless loaves—but he has determined to accomplish his work through you.

And he will accomplish his work! If we ask like Paul, “Who is sufficient for these things?”³ then we must answer like Paul later in that same letter to the Corinthians:

Such is the confidence that we have through Christ toward God. Not that we are sufficient in ourselves to claim anything as coming from us, but our sufficiency is from God, who has made us sufficient to be ministers of a new covenant...⁴

Jesus will multiply the loaves of his salvation so that they reach the furthest corners of the crowds seated upon the green grass. He will build his church, will edify her by the bread of his own person. And we may like the Twelve find such little faith within ourselves, and so much of a realism that denies we could ever see success in our labors for Christ, whether to reach the lost or to edify the found, that we at first refuse the Lord’s command to feed the crowd.

But when we look up, we will not find a stern brow disappointed with our failure. Instead we will find the hand of Jesus extended with one piece of his infinite provision, and the smaller but, for us, more manageable command: “Just give them this.”

³ 2 Corinthians 2:16.

⁴ 3:4-6.