

You never know when you are going to learn your next lesson about God. And you never know when God will next test you on whether you have learnt that lesson or not.

I read recently of a Presbyterian minister, Mike Turner, who was completing his Sabbatical leave with a solo hike for a week in the wilderness in the US state of Wyoming. He has just spent weeks, months, reading, praying, studying, refreshing himself, preparing himself to again take on the responsibilities of his ministry. And to conclude his time, his plan was to '*wander in wonder*' for about 90 kilometres as he drew closer to his Creator God.

But on day 4, as he was slowly and cautiously picking his way through a sea of boulders, Mike's feet slipped on an unsteady rock. He leaped to another hoping for balance but Mike had set an avalanche in motion and when the dust cleared and the noise subsided, Mike found himself pinned between two boulders right above his knees. He wrote in his journal, "About 2 hours ago a large rock rolled upon me and trapped my legs, I was very careful be sure of that, but I hurt. . . I am in your hands Lord. . . I don't know what I face."

We don't know when we are going to learn our next lesson about God, do we? Because lessons can be learnt as we quietly open God's word, but they can also be learnt as we face unexpected circumstances in life. And often, straight after a lesson, God sends us an examination, to see if we have put those lessons into practice.

Now Jesus & his disciples had had a particularly busy time of late, for where ever they went, crowds seemed to flock, people made demands, the sick was brought to be healed & now they were close to exhaustion. So they withdrew across Lake Galilee, but the crowds ran alongside of the lake & so instead of having some much needed R &R, Jesus and his disciples had some 5,000 men, maybe 15,000 people to minister to.

1. The Lesson. He knew they were hungry, some had not eaten for four days. He knew that there was a lot of them, 5000 men plus women and children. He knew they didn't have enough food on them, so when he sees the crowd coming, he says to Philip "Where are we going to buy bread for these people to eat?" And Philip's maybe thinking, "What? Who says *we have to?*"

But John tells us that Jesus is only making conversation. Stringing him along. Testing him. Because he's actually already made up his mind *what he's going to do*. But Philip can only think about the money, which to be honest, most of us would have been on the exact same wave length. But in the meantime, Andrew, has had a quick look at all the food they have and found just one boy with 5 small barley cakes and two small fish. So all they have is one youngster's lunch, not nearly enough for everyone.

But remember, Jesus wants to teach the people a lesson - so he gets them to sit down. And then in front of them all he holds before them this one boy's lunch and thanks God for His great provision and then gets the disciples to hand out the food. And the food doesn't just stretch, it multiplies until ever single person has not just had a snack, a mouthful even but a feast. The Bible says that all had enough to eat and not wanting to waste a thing, they collect the scraps and took in 12 basketfuls of bread and fish.

The lesson that Jesus wants to teach in this action is that God is able to supply all our needs. In one incredibly visible lesson, Jesus reminds the hungry people that God is the source of all good

gifts. That instead of complaining about what we don't have, instead of dreaming about how things would be much better if we just won lotto, or if I just had a bit more cash, we should be thankful that we have a God who promises to meet our deepest needs.

But even more than that, he doesn't just meet our needs, he lavishes upon his people more than what they need. For there are 12 basketfuls left over. There is enough for all the 12 disciples to have some for later. God isn't stingy, God doesn't give you the bare minimum, but because he owns the cattle on a thousand hills as the Psalmist says, he can more than adequately meet our needs.

That's a lesson for the disciples to learn and for us to learn. George Mueller, a Christian man who ran an orphanage in London, one day had no food to give his orphans and no money to buy them food. He got them to sit down for breakfast in front of an empty table. He then thanked God for His goodness and his provision of daily bread and when they all had said "Amen", there was a knock at the door. A local baker was wondering if they could use some of the bread that he had just baked this morning.

Now do we know that lesson? Well we probably know it in our heads. But do we really know it? We pray in the Lord's prayer for our daily bread, because God has asked us to do that. But God is a God who does look after His children. Not always in the way we would like, but he does promise to provide. We need to be men & women of thanks. This passage is teaching us that 1 kid + 5 loaves + 2 fish + Jesus = An abundant feast. But the truth is 1 believer + Jesus = An abundant life.

2. The Examination. But if the feeding of the 5000 is the lesson, what comes after it is the examination. Having learnt how great God is, would they again concentrate on their own needs, on their own wants or on God's will? Would they want to continue to set the agenda, or would they let Jesus set the agenda? Would they be thankful for what has happened or be hungry for Jesus to do more?

Well almost immediately they try and force Jesus to become their King. Wow, if he can lead them, no child would live in poverty ever again. If Jesus was at the head of an army, no other army would be able to stop him, not even the Romans. If he was their King it might be the return of the good ole days when under Moses, or David or Solomon, Israel was a great and prosperous and independent nation.

They see that Jesus is a winner and so they jump on the bandwagon. It's what the *crowd wants*. But it's not what Jesus wants. Because his agenda is not the same as *their* agenda. In fact, *his idea* of what makes a worthwhile leader is the *exact opposite* of theirs. As one preacher has said, Jesus isn't going to *march on Jerusalem* carrying the *spear* and *bringing judgement*. But to *receive the spear thrust*. And *bear the judgement*. They are just thinking about themselves, when they should be thinking about God. Their comfort, not God's will.

And unfortunately the disciples are caught up in all of this as well. Because soon after Jesus sends away the crowds, he tells the disciples to go back home on the boat & he goes away to a lonely place to pray & soon after, a huge squall comes across the lake. The disciples, some of whom are professional fisherman are scared stiff, but they become even more afraid when later on that night, Jesus walks on the water past their boat.

This is now the disciples examination, will they trust that God will meet their need for safety? Do

they really know and believe in God's good provision for their lives? Are they willing to trust in God even in the midst of the storm? Unfortunately no, they too will fail the exam. They have not really learnt the lesson that Jesus has taught them.

But what about us? Do we believe that God will provide what we need? And I'm not just talking about food here? Will he make available the support, the friendships, the love that I need? Will he abandon me when I'm in trouble? Can I really trust him when things fall apart? Someone has said that the Christian is like a tea bag; hot water brings out the best in him. Someone else has said he is like a steam engine; he performs best when under pressure. I wonder if that is true of us, or are we just full of head knowledge.

After the initial shock of the rock slide and entrapment, Mike turned to survival when he realized he could not free himself. And he prepared himself for a wait, a long wait, to give himself the best chance of survival. Turner wrote in his journal, "I dreamed of a special time with God, facing the elements, the passes, thinking about life, the direction of the church, about my family. Indeed this has been all of those things only magnified 100 times. I believe I will survive, smarter or wiser, more thoughtful, more aware of limits . . . I do feel confident in my Christian hope. God will make a way either earthly or heavenly."

3. The Second Lesson But Jesus hasn't finished with either his disciples or the crowd, he wants to teach them a second lesson, this time through straight teaching. So when the crowds again find him, he builds on the lessons of the feeding of the 5000 with talk about bread and about manna.

Now what he says is far from easy. Often Jesus spoke incredibly simply, in parables, in stories, in miracles and sometimes he spoke in metaphors, in symbolism, in vivid language. And this time he spoke with difficult words, because he wanted those around him to think, to ponder, to chew over what he was saying.

Let me try and chop up what he says into bite sized chunks. Firstly he talks about our greatest need. It is not food for our body, but food for our soul. And so he says in verse 27, "*Do not work for food that spoils, but for food that endures to eternal life.*"

So often we place all our emphasis on our physical needs - on food, on drink, on love, on sex, on shelter, on acceptance. We chase the meeting of our wants, our needs. We think that life is about being healthy, wealthy and wise and we forget that God has made us with a need that is even more basic than these.

Jesus continues by pointing to the modern manna. For just as the Israelites when they were crossing the desert, having come out of Egypt and on their way to the promised land, was fed everyday with manna from heaven, so we need to feast on God's daily bread. Just as that manna was a gift of God, something that couldn't be earned, so the gift of eternal life is a gift of God that cannot be earned. Just as the manna came directly from heaven, so the gift of eternal life comes from heaven through the bread of life, Jesus. And just as the Israelites would not have survived without God's manna, so the Christian cannot survive without Jesus.

But Jesus goes on and says that his bread is even better than the manna that we read of in the book of Exodus. That manna only lasted one day, Jesus modern manna last all the way to eternal life. What's more the first manna had to be eaten every day, but the one who believes in Jesus only has to eat his bread once and he has eternal life. And with the first manna there was no cost to God in sending it each day, but for Jesus modern manna, the cost was a huge one, for it meant his son

had to die as an object of scorn and abuse on a cross.

Now Jesus doesn't mince his words here. And for some it leaves a bad taste in their mouths. But what he is saying is that we are safe in God's hands. That he is the good shepherd, and we the sheep should look to him and trust in him, completely

4. Which leads us to **The Final Results** The lessons have now been taught, by word and by action. The challenge has now been placed fairly and squarely before the crowds and the disciples. So what will happen next? Who will pass and who will fail?

Well it is obvious from the last part of the passage, verses 60 to 71, that many, many walk away from Jesus. Some say it is all too hard to understand, I don't want to think about it, so I'll go my own way. But others find it hard in another way, hard to accept. And yet the disciples stick around. They are honest enough to realise they don't understand how it all works out, but they do recognise that Jesus has the words of eternal life.

Some walk away, some stick around, but neither is apathetic. They realise you must accept what Jesus is saying wholeheartedly, or reject it wholeheartedly. You must talk the talk and walk the walk or do neither. Either you go the whole hog, or you chicken out, there is no middle ground.

When Mike Turner didn't turn up after his 9 day hike his wife sent out a search party, including most of his Church, criss crossing the dangerous terrain. But they didn't find him alive. Twenty days later they found his body and his final journal entry...

"Fill me with peace, Lord, May the conditions not deny my love for you. . . I am ready to die though missing my family. To live is Christ, to die is gain, I will trust in God though he will slay me, yet will I trust him, he is the way, the truth, and the life."

Backpacker magazine writes after this journal entry, "As his final hours approached, Turner's body shut down; but it was as though his spirit was opening up. All the questions, all the doubt and anger seemed to dissolve. What remained was the unbreakable bedrock of belief. On the tenth day Mike wrote "God loves, Love Dad, Mike." Then there was silence.

Backpacker magazine writes, "A boulder could crush his legs; (but) it could not crush his faith!" For Mike had learned the lessons that God was teaching him. If only we too would pass our next examination like he did. It may be tonight in Church, it may be in the car on the way home, it may be tomorrow. But will we look to Jesus to meet our needs and our wants in *his way not ours*. For that is the ultimate test of faith.