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AGENTS OF OMNIPOTENCE (I)

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Thousands fed from one lad's lunchbox! Christ's greatest miracle over nature. A divine spectacular with a message of dynamic hope for us all.

Christ took two sprats and five barley loaves and satisfied the hunger of over five thousand men plus an unknown number of women and children. Leaving aside Jesus' healing ministry, this was undoubtedly his greatest and most awesome miracle and is so important that it is described in all four Gospels. We need to understand why Jesus performed such a staggering wonder. The supreme display of divine omnipotence has many dazzling facets, some of which are examined here.

Omnipotence and human response

When Christ saw the crowds gathering, he asked Philip, "*Where shall we buy bread for these people to eat?*" (John 6:5). Philip was just an ordinary man, a follower of Jesus. To be asked this question by the Master himself put the poor man on the spot. As Philip came from that area, he probably knew his way to a number of baker's shops. What bothered him was not *where* they could buy bread, but what they could buy bread with. His reply was about cash. Eight months' wages would not be enough to buy food for such a crowd, he said. Not even ten times that amount would suffice. Maybe the equivalent of eight months wages was all that Jesus and his disciples had in the kitty.

In fact, Jesus was testing Philip for he "*already had in mind what he was going to do*" (John 6:6). Did Philip miss that one little word, "we"? Jesus' question was "*Where shall WE buy bread ...?*" – not "Where will YOU buy bread?" He was not expecting Philip to do it all; he shared the problem and the responsibilities that went with it. For all of us who serve the Lord that word "we" should be written in large letters on our mental notice board as the basis for everything we undertake.

Jesus said, "*Without me you can do nothing*" (John 15:5, NKJV). Is that a warning? Was the intention to make us anxious? Are we supposed to struggle in prayer for hours on end in order to feel sure that he is with us? Surely if we can do nothing without him, he will see to it that he does not leave us to cope on our own. His work and his glory are too important to depend on whether or not we sense his presence. He would never sit back and fold his arms while we struggle with a task beyond our abilities or beg and plead for his help, ever hopeful and never sure. His promise is "*Surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age*" (Matthew 28:20). Whatever load we have to carry, he takes the other handle. He is a loyal working partner – a managing director who is not above getting his hands dirty. That is made powerfully evident in the story of the feeding of the five thousand, as we shall see.

Omnipotence needs manpower

Jesus did not produce bread out of thin air. He started out with a small amount, provided by a boy. Thereby hangs a tale with a hundred meanings. Just think about it for a moment – five thousand men plus mothers with children had followed Jesus. Had no one other than a small boy brought anything to eat? Surely at least a few others must have been the kind who would pay attention to practical matters. Yet the disciples only found one boy who would let them have anything. That boy made it possible for the greatest miracle over nature since creation to take place, enjoying an unrepeatable and exclusive privilege. What a tale he would have to tell for the rest of his life!

If others had brought something with them to eat, they kept it to themselves. So imagine how they must have felt when the disciples gave them bread and fish from the boy's packed lunch. Jesus could have used their sandwiches but they let the opportunity slip by – not the opportunity of a lifetime but of all time.

Givers never go short. God does not write checks or drop cash from the windows of heaven. He has already put everything that we need on this earth and given us the ability to acquire wealth. God relies on us for his plan and purpose. He gives so that we can give, demonstrating our trustworthiness, to bring about his will and purpose. We are to be agents of providence. Physical or material needs can be met only through us. In other words, his plan is for us to cooperate with him, with his providential care. If, like the boy at Galilee, we only have a little to give, we do not need to worry: the Lord can make a lot out of a little. With what we give the Lord can do what we never could.

Omnipotence calls for human action

Jesus could multiply loaves and fish but only in the hands of his disciples. Can we picture the scene? Jesus took the five barley loaves and said grace. There was absolutely nothing out of the ordinary in that; Jesus used the standard Jewish formula. Rather than pronouncing some kind of blessing over the barley loaves, Jesus gave thanks to God for what he knew would be provision for the multitude.

Meanwhile Jesus had everything organized. Everyone was first to sit down in groups of fifty or so. This meant that when the food was served there would be no queuing, scrambling, or pushing, with women and children being elbowed out of the way. Jesus works miracles but there is a calm, unhurried rationale behind it all. There is no need for any faith project to demonstrate frenzy.

Now just look what happened next! Jesus did not make a huge pile of bread and fish so that the people could help themselves. He only ever had five loaves and two small fish in his hands. He broke the loaves, gave a piece or two to each of the twelve disciples, and told them to go to the groups of people sitting on the grass. Notice that Jesus did not multiply the food and then give each disciple enough for fifty to eat. He gave the disciples only one or two pieces each, not basketfuls.

Like the others, Peter was given a handful of food. He looked at it and at the fifty people ten steps away. He shook his head in puzzlement and dismay. Did Jesus really mean him to share one handful of bread with fifty people? He took one step and stopped, thinking it was too

ridiculous even to start. He looked back and saw that Jesus was smiling, confident and reassuring. Peter glanced at the pieces of food in his hands and then back to Jesus, again and again. Then suddenly he grasped Jesus' intention; it was as if the Master were saying, "Go! Go! Go!" The first group was only ten steps away, but those steps needed faith. As Peter looked at Jesus, faith flooded him. That is the secret of doing the impossible: "*Looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith*" (Hebrews 12:2, NKJV).

Many have been called and sent, but they look at their meager resources and limited abilities and never take the ten steps of faith. With the little they have, how could it be anything other than a hopeless task? So they opt for a life of humdrum routine and forget to look at Jesus. As each disciple by the Sea of Galilee looked at their Master and took steps to do what seemed foolish and impossible, the miracle began to unfold. That is what Christianity is about – keeping your eyes on Jesus.

Peter went up to the first man, wondering what Jesus meant him to do. The Master had explained nothing about a miraculous multiplication. So poor Peter did the only thing he could – he broke off a piece or two of bread and offered it to one of the waiting group. The hungry man did not stop to think twice; he grabbed the food, pushed it into his mouth, and then looked up for more and ... there *was* more! That is how it always is. If we do what God tells us, God always lives up to his reputation.

Peter's heart leaped with amazement and joy at what was happening in his own hands. He knew that he was not the source of such power, but that Jesus was. The Creator was at work through the hands of a mere human being. Jesus is where the impossible begins. You only have to be with him to see it happen. The disciples' hearts began to beat fast with excitement. Soon Andrew, Philip, John ... all of them were running, jumping, and serving with eagerness. They stood in each group and kept breaking off bread and handing out fish. The food soon became a big heap and the people passed it round. This was no minimum diet; the people had plenty to eat, for abundance is the hallmark of God. With Jesus there is always enough and to spare.

Just think what that means for us! The disciples dared to do something that looked ridiculously impossible. They could have stood beside Jesus and done nothing, or prayed for him to do something somehow. That would have been so familiar. People pray for the Lord to work when what he wants is for *us* to work. What use is it going to one prayer meeting after another to pray for power if you never do anything that needs power? What good is it to spend twenty-four hours a day in prayer if your prayers are steeped in disobedience and unbelief? We can give way all too easily to the fear of failure, the devil's constant temptation. We try to be logical about the small piece of bread we have. Unfortunately, that will not get us very far; faith does not come by logic. You do not need a university degree in theology to believe. Omnipotence only flows through hands that distribute bread. Obedience is the vehicle, which carries believers – even timid ones – into the miracle zone.

On that day long ago a nameless boy, a nonentity who did nothing more astounding than let Jesus have his lunch, was the vital element in the greatest miracle ever performed. Many people read about men and women who have had marvelous experiences of God and close the book with the impression that they are worthless nobodies. But God is not looking for the great and famous; he just needs people who will believe and go. Jesus said, "*These signs will accompany those who believe*" – not those who are gifted (Mark 16:17). The lad with his simple lunchbox could have let somebody more responsible give up his food, perhaps a father with a large picnic for his family. But all Jesus needed was the boy's cooperation. Give him everything we have

and he can do everything he wants. One crumb in the hands of Jesus turns into more bread than all the bakers in the world can make.

The simple truth blazes out like a challenge to us today. God does not ask us to do the possible; that is what we always do; God asks the impossible. He says, "*Be perfect ... as your heavenly Father is perfect*" (Matthew 5:48). Our call is to be children of God, to love as he loved, give as he gave, and do what he did. The parameters are infinite. He calls us to move out of the natural into the supernatural, to follow him beyond the mundane and ordinary, beyond our own limitations, to excel. If we are willing to cooperate, he makes it feasible. He baptizes in the Holy Spirit and power. World religions aim to generate calmness of spirit but Jesus gives a peace that is not of this world. His is not the peace found in a cemetery but peace in action, peace fitted with a hidden dynamo.

<http://www.cfan.org/offices/usa/biblestudies/february01/feb012.htm>

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