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The Food Question (1939)

by T. Austin-Sparks

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Reading: John 4:31-34; 6:1-14, 60-71.

These three portions of Scripture all have to do with the food question. The food question is very much in view in these portions of the Word of the Lord, and it is about spiritual food that I feel the Lord wants something said at this time.

The Lord's Desire is Fulness

There are some simple deductions that we may draw, and conclusions to which we may come from this opening part of chapter 6, such as the clear fact that the Lord Jesus has it in His heart that all who come to Him should be fully satisfied; He was moved with compassion. It is a heart matter with the Lord Jesus that all who come to Him should be fully satisfied, that they should be filled full. Our translation often puts the word the other way round, "fulfilled," but it is the same thing, filled full. When you come to think about it, this is a Divine thought expressed throughout the whole of the Scriptures. God desires fulness to be a mark of the life which is related to Himself, and God's ultimate intention is that all His fulness shall be poured into the vessel of the Church, the Body of Christ: filled full in Him. That is one simple deduction to be made from this portion of Scripture, and must be before us both as a fact stated and a test of our relationship to the Lord. It immediately interrogates us; have we found in the Lord Jesus absolute fulness, complete satisfaction, or are we still without that finality which is in Him? Are we enjoying and rejoicing in fulness in Christ? With that testimony to His desire, that test before us, we are led on in these passages to see the way of fulness, and then the object of fulness, so that these three things, very simple, are here.

Firstly, the Lord's desire that these in relation to Himself should be filled full, and have something to

spare; then as to the way of fulness, and then as to the object of fulness.

I think we can dismiss number one at once. I hope we can. Our hearts do respond to that. Many of us are quite ready immediately to say that we know the Lord's desire is for our fulness because He has become to us all and in all. That does not mean that we have no more desire, no more longing, but it does mean that we have found the realm in which all our satisfaction is gathered up, and that realm is the Lord Jesus Himself, and we have no desire nor inclination to go outside of Him for anything; He is everything. We are daily discovering how very full He is. More and more we are discovering that "In Him all the fulness dwells," and that is far more than we have ever yet experienced, or expect to experience on this earth, but we are altogether spoiled for any other sphere or source of life. Some of us can say that truly. I hope that you can say that, but if there is anyone who is not able to say that, let me declare it again as a strong affirmation, as to the revealed mind of God, He desires that all those that are in relation to Himself shall be fully satisfied.

The Way of Fulness

Now then we can go on as to the way of fulness. The Lord's way of fulness, beloved, - it may sound to you almost ridiculous - is feeding: but I put it like that because some people seem to think it is a kind of effervescence, it is becoming wonderfully, mysteriously conscious of a bubbling up and overflowing for no reason whatever, and they are trying to get full that way and want to have a wonderful series or continuation of sensations of fulness and satisfaction, and so on. That is not the Lord's way. The fulness of the Lord is not air, not effervescence, it is feeding. The Lord does not do this in a miraculous way which suspends all spiritual exercise and activity on our part. The Lord makes provision and calls us to appropriation, and the appropriation is of a very practical character. You will never be full of the Lord's fulness only as you apply yourself to feed upon the Lord, to feed upon and assimilate the Lord's provision.

Nothing can be a more elementary statement than that, yet it has to be made lest we should be living in a false realm. So we have the miracle of the loaves and fishes, a provision made to realise the Lord's end of fulness, and the Word stated that they were caused to eat "and they did eat." Now coming back to John 4 you have the Lord's own explanation of what He Himself means by eating. When the disciples came with the bread which they had gone into the city to buy because they and He were hungry, and begged Him saying, "Master, eat," He waived their bread aside and said, "I have meat to eat that ye know not of." They said, "Hath any man given Him to eat?" and then He explained. "My meat and My drink is to do the will of Him that sent Me and to finish His work."

So, feeding unto fulness and satisfaction according to the Lord's own definition and explanation is obedience to the will of God. Do you want to grow and flourish and be satisfied, and happy because satisfied? The way, beloved, is instant and prompt obedience to every intimation of the Divine will. Do you want to be thin and half-starved and miserable, and murmuring, and never content spiritually? Just suspend your obedience to one little bit of the known will of God and it will produce that result very quickly. "My meat is to do the will of Him that sent Me." The Lord Jesus found wonderful satisfaction along that line and wonderful peace, and wonderful joy, and you know, beloved, there is nothing so stimulating and strengthening as to know you are in the will of God. You ask anybody who knows anything about it: and if you know that you are in the will of God and that you are with the Lord, and that you are for the Lord according to His will, you are in a wonderfully strong, healthy, happy, restful, victorious position; a man or woman on top. It does not matter what it may be costing, there is a marvellous strength from being in that position.

Ask David about this thing. This youth, this stripling, has been sent by his father up from the field or

the sheep-fold with bread for his brethren in the army, and to enquire after their well-being. As he comes to the army there comes out from the hosts of the Philistines that monster who has day by day been challenging the hosts of Israel "Find me a man to come and fight with me," and Israel could not find him a man, they could not find a man! Things are in a bad way, a very bad way. David hears the challenge; a youth, a stripling, his brothers altogether misunderstanding his motive, no one giving him much countenance, recognition or counting him as much: despised, but knowing the Lord.

As he is brought to King Saul and offers to go and meet that Philistine, Saul looks at him and says, "Whose son are you?" "Where do you come from?" David gives his testimony. One day while he was looking after those few sheep a lion attacked and he took the lion and rent it as he would have rent a kid. Another day a bear attacked his flock and he took the bear and tore it asunder. Listen, "The Lord who delivered me out of the mouth of the lion and the paw of the bear will deliver me out of the hand of this Philistine, this uncircumcised Philistine." His testimony to his knowledge of the Lord. And what a position of ascendancy that secret fellowship with God put him into, moral ascendancy in a day when all that represented God was in such a poor condition... could not find a man. But God had in secret one despised among men who knew Him in experience, one who had proved God.

David is a marvellous expression, representation of one who knows the Lord and trusts in the Lord, and puts no trust in anything else. What one likes about David is that he refers everything to the Lord. When Saul with his pious religious platitudes said to David, "Go and the Lord be with thee," he also said, "Now take this suit of armour." Piously he meant well when he said "The Lord be with thee" - but that is not enough, "you had better have some armour as well!" Trust in the Lord - *but!* David donned the armour, but was uncomfortable. "I cannot go with this, I have not proved this, I have proved the Lord, I *do* know the Lord, and you can have your armour, I am prepared to trust Him." Now to the giant, "I come to you with a sling and five smooth" - no, I do not; "I come to you in the Name of the Lord of hosts whose armies you have defied." Who is the giant on that field? David is the giant and that day something entered into the head of Goliath that had never been there before. The point is this, beloved, that strength, robustness, fulness, confidence, assurance come by standing in wholly with God on the basis of all His will. You will be reproached, for like David in a day when things are religiously in a state of declension, the man of faith who dares to step out and trust God is always misrepresented, slandered, and his motives are always twisted. "I know," said the elder brother of David, "the wickedness of thine heart, you have come to see the battle." Yes, the man who trusts in the Lord in a day when things are in a poor spiritual condition will have his motives twisted, distorted, misrepresented; but if he stands in with God he has assurance and confidence, he is in ascendancy even though he may be misunderstood, set at naught and discounted, he is standing with God, for God's will, and that is the secret of satisfaction, strength, fulness, robustness. The Lord Jesus was ever in ascendancy spiritually and morally in that day of spiritual declension.

Well, the secret was that He was with God and God was with Him, they were together, and there was never one moment's hesitation in His life about doing the will of God. Now that will of God will cover every stage, every step of life. It will begin on the very first point of taking our place as a sinner before God, acknowledging ourselves to be helpless in the matter of our salvation, and desperately in need of salvation and a Saviour, and by faith taking the Lord Jesus as that Saviour for our salvation. That is the first thing in the will of God, and it is the first step to satisfaction and fulness, and when you take it - everybody here who has gone that way can testify to the fact - there is a wonderful sense of satisfaction, fulness; following that step, joy begins.

From that point onward, therefore, the whole course of our life and experience, our growth,

increase, fulness, is bound up with steps of obedience to the will of God. We have known many to make shipwreck of their faith, to wreck their own spiritual life by coming to a standstill upon some point of the known will of God; something the Lord has told them to do; something upon which the Lord has put His finger as not according to His mind; something which the Lord has shown them to be a part of the "all righteousness" to be fulfilled: some step of obedience in some way, in some connection, and they have stopped. Perhaps they have discussed it with others, perhaps they have taken the counsel and advice of men, perhaps they have tried to find a back-door out of it. But no, God does not move, and by reserving their obedience their spiritual life has been arrested at that point and they have begun a course of decline, and we have seen many spiritually go to pieces upon just some question of absolute obedience to the known will of God. The Lord Jesus said "My meat (that by which I live, upon which I am maintained and sustained, that which is the secret of my strength) is not the bread that perisheth but the doing of the will of My Father, of Him that sent Me and finishing His work."

Now I do not know why I am led to speak like that. We very rarely do know why we are led to speak as we do, but this has a strong emphasis in my heart, to say that, and the Lord may be touching some life that does know His will in a certain matter, and there has not been obedience following, going on, it has been suspended, excuses have been made. *You* know, I do not, and the Lord knows just the meaning of that word now. The way of going on into the fulness, growing up into Him in all things, the way of a testimony to the absolute satisfaction in Christ, the way to a strong position in God, the way to usefulness to the Lord, is just the way of unreserved and un-delayed obedience to everything that has been known of His will. The people of open spirit and honest heart, who are ready and who without any hesitation, recognising the will of God, do it, are the people who go ahead spiritually by leaps and bounds. This is not a matter of years or time. Spiritual growth never was a matter of time. A youth may be leagues ahead of an old man spiritually, upon this simple basis of doing the will of God. Samuel was far ahead of Eli spiritually simply because his heart was open to the Lord and obedient, and Eli's was not. That is the way of fulness, the way of satisfaction, in brief.

The Object of Fulness

Now the object of fulness. Of course, the object is clearly unto making others full: unto ministry. You may take some of the features if you like, a little Bible study for a minute or two. You have to begin with five thousand. Now thousands, in the Bible always stand to represent figuratively, multitudes. I suppose that lies on the face of it - multitudes, a large company. Here you have five thousand, and five in the Bible is the number of grace, and what is figuratively represented here is a multitude whose life is by grace. Lest they die in the wilderness they are going to be saved and satisfied by grace. The Lord was under no legal obligation to meet their need. They had come out, they were in need, they might perish, they might faint: the Lord is moved with compassion. Grace is that by which they are saved and satisfied. A multitude, therefore, whose life is by grace is what is before us, and Christ is their life. Five loaves; the loaves, of course, speak of Christ, the Bread. That is borne out in chapter 6, as you see further on. Christ the Bread of life, and five loaves, grace comes in again. Christ is made life unto us by the grace of God. It is the grace of God that has given the Lord Jesus to us. Marvellous grace of God which has shown itself in giving His Son from heaven to be our very life, that is clear, and very simple.

Two fishes. Fishes as we know by now in the Scriptures are symbols of what is universal. The sea is a type of universality, the depth of the sea, the breadth of the sea, the expanse of the sea; if you want a word that speaks of universality, well, the sea speaks of that, it embraces very much, it covers so much. Oh! the fulness of the sea, and the expanse of the sea. Get out into the middle of the Atlantic and you will get a good sensation of what universality is, and if only you knew what was in that

ocean you would have a deeper sensation still! Fishes speak of universality. Two is the Bible number of testimony or witness. What is here? The testimony to the universal fulness of Jesus Christ given to men. This is only a figure leading on to the epistles, leading on to Colossians 1, the universal fulness of Christ, that He fills all and that all fulness is in Him. Two ways of the fulness of Christ are revealed in the epistles, that in the intention of God He will fill all things, and in the same intention of God all things are summed up in Him. It is the expanse of the ocean and the inclusion of the ocean in the fishes, and the *testimony* of the two to the universal fulness and all-embracingness and expansiveness of the Lord Jesus. You are well on your way to see what satisfaction is when you know the Lord Jesus. That is your foundation.

Twelve disciples. Twelve is the number of administrative responsibility. You can study all the twelves of your Bible with that in mind and see how that is so. The disciples represent for the Lord an instrument of administration and administrative responsibility in relation to the need out there and the desire in Him. Now you are beginning to see the object of fulness - ministry. Ministry which has two sides, the realisation of His heart's desire, and the satisfaction of men's need by Him. Twelve baskets come into view in the end. And it is interesting and significant to notice that the Greek word there is the diminutive which means "hand basket". It is not a big clothes basket, it is the hand basket, which means that within the corporate instrument, the twelve, every man has a personal responsibility. It is not three or four men carrying one big basket, it is every man carrying his own basket. We very often put a good deal of our own responsibility on to the corporate instrument, and get out of something. No, the idea of the Lord in the corporate instrument is that everyone has individual responsibility. We must be careful of the application of the corporate which relieves us of our share of the responsibility. We put it on to the Church when the Lord has put it on us individually.

Twelve baskets, hand baskets. And there is a lad here, and he introduces another law. He is without a name altogether. He is not some well-known person. He is not here on the basis of what he is in himself, or of his ability, his accomplishment. He is here on no other basis than that he has got something.

Now take that right to heart. Ministry, beloved, in the realisation of the Lord's desire, and the meeting of the need of which He is conscious, is never upon the basis of official appointment, nor popularity, nor brilliance, ability, nor reputation; ministry is upon the basis that we have got something. Many people are marvellously brilliant without being able to give you a crumb of spiritual food. This lad is only in the picture because he has got something, and that is a law of spiritual ministry. The Lord requires that. You see you have got the typical elements in this story and when you put them together you come to a remarkable thing. Take account of this. In John, (it is not the same in the other Gospels because another thing is in view, therefore this point is not there), it is all the way through what the Lord Jesus is. He is kept pre-eminently in view as the centre of everything in John's Gospel, all the way through it is the Person of the Lord Jesus.

The significant thing about this narrative of the event is that they are not called the twelve until they have discovered what the food is and have fed upon it. You look, and you will see that it is at the end of this story they are called the twelve for the first time. "He called unto Him His disciples," but it does not say the twelve. At the end it comes in "the twelve." They were twelve, but they were twelve disciples at the beginning when they were used, but when they had learned the lesson that the Lord was seeking to teach, and when they themselves had partaken of that bread, recognising what that bread represented, then after that they were called the twelve. That is, beloved, that they were recognised to be the administrative instrument of the Lord when they themselves had got experimental ground upon which to minister; that they themselves had come into the administrative

responsibility on the ground of their having discovered the spiritual secrets of the Lord Jesus, and in type, had fed upon Him, themselves. That is no subtle thing, but is very much to the point. You see that John 6 opens with the story of the feeding of the five thousand but almost immediately passes on to "I am the bread of life," and this was circling round the feast of the Passover, so that what the Lord Jesus has got in the back of His mind in this whole thing is Himself, the Bread of Life.

What Ministry is

Now He is going to give them a great experimental object lesson in what it means to have Christ as your life, as your life in a wilderness, in a place where no bread is, in a day of famine. So He said to Philip "Where shall we buy bread? This He said to prove him for He knew what He would do." Why should He say that to Philip? For two reasons. Philip was one of two men who, in a special way represented ministry. Philip and Andrew are always to the fore in doing things: always - so to speak - the active men in the matter of service, and so they in a special way represent service. That is one reason. The truth of ministry is in view, and ministry is, as we have said, the imparting of Christ out of our own knowledge, our own hearts, our own lives: ministry is not giving out truth, preaching something out of the Bible; ministry is the imparting of the Lord Jesus in the Holy Spirit. Another reason why He said this to Philip was because He knew that Philip was not seeing who He Himself was. Afterward, later in this same Gospel, Philip said to Him "Lord, show us the Father and it sufficeth us." Jesus said unto him, "Have I been so long time with you and yet hast thou not known Me, Philip?" What does that say in effect? "Philip, you have been having your eyes on Me all these months, and these past three years or so, your eyes have been on Me but you have not seen Me. You have been watching what I have been doing, hearing what I have been saying, going round with Me all the time, but you have not seen Me yet, Philip." And so He turns to Philip in order to add one more thing to Philip's education, and the education of these disciples.

So all is bound up with the discovery of who and what the Lord Jesus is. That is the education to ministry; the best kind of training; discovering all that the Lord Jesus is for the heart and for the life; and you can only minister in the measure in which you know Him, and no more. Ministry is in view, but it must be upon the basis of our experimental, personal, inward apprehension of the Lord Jesus. And so they are not called the twelve - that is the responsible administrative vessel - until in a practical way they have come to know who He is: and you can imagine that their eyes were very widely opening as they saw five small loaves and two small fishes growing, and growing, and you can imagine in the end when they went round with their baskets - there was only one conclusion, this is not an ordinary man, this is the Son of God. Thus they were brought to know Him in order to constitute them God's responsible instruments in a day of spiritual starvation.

We have not much further to go. The food question is an acute one today. No matter where you go in this world you will find people who tell you that a state of spiritual starvation abounds. There is much hunger and much need and we know all too well how real that starvation is. People go many miles just to get a little bit of real spiritual food. We could tell many wonderful stories about that. People who will walk 20 miles to get one meeting where there is spiritual food. Perhaps you are not so acutely alive to it if you are constantly getting good food, but if you got out you would discover this is so. There is the need, there is the state, there is the hunger.

On the other hand, there is the Lord's passion and the Lord's desire that that state should not continue but that it should be met. But then the Lord is not going to meet that in a kind of sovereign way independently, because He has bound Himself to operate through an administrative instrument, His Church. But in order that it might be something more than a merely financial thing, an ecclesiastical thing, a formal thing, in order that it might be living in its ministry, it has got to come

experimentally where it truly and deeply does know the Lord, apprehends Christ and appreciates Him, and has found its own life in Him, and Him to be its life, without Whom there is no living. That is the basis of the ministry. So that the Lord would make everything very practical in that sense and very experimental, and take us into those experiences which land us out of our depths. "Philip, whence shall we buy bread enough to feed this multitude?" He had landed Philip clean out of his depth. He knew what He would do. He was proving Philip. "Two hundred pennyworth of bread...." Immediately Philip begins to talk within the compass of what is natural, and the Lord is trying to get him off that level altogether into a place of faith's appropriation of what Christ is.

Beloved, that is just what the Lord is trying to do with us all the time, and He would put us out of our depth, bring us up against propositions which are absolutely beyond us, and break our hearts with a situation over which we are so conscious of our utter insufficiency. I believe, beloved, that one of God's laws of increase, enlargement in usefulness, in service, in ministry, is to bring us recurrently, again and again, into a new position where our hearts almost break with the consciousness of the need, the situation as it is, and we despair afresh of ever being able to do anything which would anything like adequately meet that need, and it seems as though we come to a new end of possibilities and of our resources. The Lord brings us there and then that very heartbreak, that very burden has become God's necessity for enlarging us with Himself.

But oh! before I close, I would lay this upon you again. That an administrative instrument to take responsibility for the need, and for the Lord's desire, must have laid upon it a burden which is far too big for itself, that it might discover Him and how big He is. And the question that should come to us as the Lord's people is this, are our hearts well nigh overwhelmed and broken with the need as we know it, as we see it, and our own absolute insufficiency to meet it? If so, that is the Lord's way of bringing us into a knowledge of Himself which will more adequately meet that need. We have to be baptised into the passion of His heart, and the only way is by seeing a need and that need coming right home to us and at the same time a consciousness that we can do nothing in ourselves to meet it. The Lord must do it, and we turn to the Lord to meet that need. That is the law of spiritual and effectual ministry.

We shall never pray aright for the Lord's people until their need has become an acute aching in our own hearts. It must be.

The Lord then, in the first place give us the obedient heart to all the known will of God, that we may increase and be satisfied, that the whole membership of Christ may get the increase of God through us. The motive for obedience is the satisfying of His heart by the meeting of the need of His own.