



Recently, I've been chewing on [the story of Jesus feeding the five thousand](#). And in particular I've been struck by the different responses of the various characters in the story—and of what it would mean to put those responses into practice in my own situation. Here are my reflections on seven responses to the invitation to partner with God in the joy of experiencing supernatural provision.

The Initiative: **God** [invites us to join him in the game of living by faith](#)
Jesus said to Philip, "Where are we to buy bread, so that these people may eat?" He said this to test him, for he himself knew what he would do.

Before we look at the responses, let's begin with God's initiative—*for from Him and through Him and to Him are all things! To Him be glory forever! Amen.*

To feed five thousand people without preparation and find provision for their needs without advance planning is transparently a foolish idea. But [as the prophet said](#), God's thoughts and ways are incomparably different from normal human so-called common-sense. And here in John's Gospel — all of which is an extended meditation on the divinity of Jesus, *the Word become flesh* — we have pointed out to us that Jesus' question to Philip is more than a foolish human question, it is a divine invitation to experience the supernatural provision of [Jehovah Jireh](#).

John calls it a 'test'. But it's not an exam they must pass for fear of losing anything—in spite of their various faltering responses of faith, they will all equally get to enjoy being utterly satisfied by God's abundant miracle-working power. Rather, Jesus is giving the disciples an opportunity to show how well they understand the power and personality of God, to put into action the faith they have in His nature and character.

And God being an [unchanging](#) God, He still gives us these same sorts of opportunities today! The question then is, when faced with these 'tests', how do we respond?

Response #1: **Philip** [assesses the need](#)
Philip answered him, "Two hundred denarii would not buy enough bread for each of them to get a little."

The first response in this story is that of Philip. Now, one could criticise Philip's visible lack of faith. [Elsewhere](#), Jesus was not slow to rebuke an inadequate response of trust in the power of God.

But here Jesus doesn't offer any correction. Perhaps he's waiting to see how the other disciples will respond. But perhaps also it's that there is at least something right about Philip's realistic assessment of the situation. In [Luke 14:28](#), Jesus tells a parable pointing out the necessity of counting the cost of a task before beginning it. And so Philip's response does in fact have something for us to imitate [in our situation](#).

Response #2: **Andrew** [finds others to contribute to the cause](#)
Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, said to him, "There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish, but what are they for so many?"

Second to speak up is Andrew. He doesn't seem overly filled with faith either. But again Jesus doesn't criticise, and again there is something for us to learn from Andrew, for although the text doesn't explicitly mention it, we know that [in general you do not have unless you ask](#). So to have received this little boy's five loaves and two fish, Andrew must have sought help from others in the crowd, and asked them to contribute to the cause.

And now seems as good a time as any to point out the fun little fact that you can treat ASK as an acronym for 'Ask, Seek, Knock' — something that [Jesus encourages all of us his disciples to do](#).

Response #3: **The Young Boy** [unquestioningly offers all that he has](#)
"There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish"

He's practically glossed over with Andrew's unhelpful statement in less than half a verse, but the young boy with the loaves and the fish is in a real sense the hero of the story. He is apparently the only one in the crowd who had had the sense to bring and keep enough food to last him until the end of Jesus' wilderness gathering, but when he hears that there is a need, he doesn't get precious with his picnic. We've heard of [the rich young man](#) who went away sad when challenged by Jesus to give away what he had to the poor—well here's the simple young boy, who unquestioningly gives all that he has so the poor can be fed.

The challenge for us then is whether we are willing to give what little we have to Jesus, even when it seems so small and insignificant to make much difference to the problems of the world around us.

Response #4: **Jesus** [thanks God for whatever has been provided, trusting it will be enough](#)
Taking the five loaves and the two fish and looking up to heaven, Jesus gave thanks and broke the loaves.

It's interesting to consider Jesus' response here as a paradigm of the faith-filled Spirit-anointed leader charged with the task of ministering to the poor and the hungry.

When God gives us a vision and people to minister to, but the resources at our command are all to obviously not up to the size of the task in question, what is our response? Do we grumble to ourselves

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and then give up? Do we scale down the scope of the original vision? Or do we stay obedient to the heavenly vision, refuse to despise the day of small things, and rather than giving way to anxiety instead give thanks in everything.

For when Jesus gives thanks, then somehow the loaves multiply. And when we do the same with our apparently insufficient resources, I believe that the same will happen.

Response #5: **Everyone** eats as much as they want.

He distributed the loaves to those who were seated; likewise also of the fish—as much as they wanted.

Here we just pause for a moment to take in the full glory of what is happening. Five thousand men. Plus women and children. Being fed with five loaves and a few fish. This is amazing. Even if you try and explain it away with the anti-supernatural idea that the boy's willingness to share simply triggered an amazing release of generosity (I won't even start on why I don't think this theory is realistic), it's still amazing. And what particularly strikes me is that they didn't just get 'as much as they needed', but 'as much as they wanted'.

Delight yourself in the Lord, and he will give you the desires of your heart. This is a promise! He will give you the very desires of your heart. Maybe he'll first have to reveal to you what your heart's desires really are. Maybe he'll first have to change what those desires are. But he will give you the desires of your heart if you delight in Him. Hallelujah!

Response #6: **The Twelve** are encouraged to be good stewards

And when they had eaten their fill, he told his disciples, "Gather up the leftover fragments, that nothing may be lost." So they gathered them up and filled twelve baskets with fragments from the five barley loaves left by those who had eaten.

I find it so fascinating that immediately after Jesus has taken a five little rolls and multiplied them so that five thousand can be satisfied, the disciples are charged with the task of making sure that none of the left-overs are wasted. If there is supernatural power available to multiply our supplies whenever necessary, then what does it matter how we steward the natural resources that we currently have?

And at once level, I think it is definitely true that Jesus doesn't want us to over-emphasise material stewardship: 'Man shall not live on bread alone but on every word that proceeds from the mouth of God'. This comes out really clearly when Jesus talks about the 'leaven of the Pharisees' — the disciples are beating themselves up over not having remembered to bring bread, and so completely miss the meaning of the word that Jesus is giving them. And he chastises them for having forgotten what happened when he fed the multitudes.

Nevertheless, Romans 14:12 says, 'Each of us will give an account of ourselves before God'. Likewise, 2 Corinthians 5:10 talks about how we must all come before the judgement seat of Christ to receive what is due for what we have done in this life. And so stewardship needs to be taken seriously! Particularly regarding the weightier matters of justice, mercy, faith and God's word to us, but still including our money and resources.

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Response #7: **Peter** realises however difficult it gets, Jesus is worth it!
After this many of his disciples turned back and no longer walked with him. So Jesus said to the Twelve, "Do you want to go away as well?" Simon Peter answered him, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life..."

Unlike the Synoptics, The Gospel of John doesn't end the story of the Feeding of the Five Thousand with the filling of their stomachs, but connects it with Jesus' subsequent proclamation that he himself is the true Bread of Life. But Jesus' message meets with dispute, dissatisfaction and the departure of a number of disciples.

As I myself wrestle with the pressure of, on the one hand a need for multiplication of provision, and as it happens, also a departure of a dissatisfied trainee (!), it's vital to keep hold of Peter's revelation that whatever happens, there is nothing that can compare to the privilege of following Jesus.

Only He has the words of eternal life. Jesus is the pearl of great price. He is worth giving up everything for. Whether or not he gives the financial provision that I think I need, Jesus is enough! He is my portion, and my exceedingly great reward.

And we remain committed to stepping out in faith even if it is not immediately obvious where the supply will come from, trusting that God will never let us down.