

A Fishing Expedition (John 21:1-14)

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Introduction

1. Although the casual reader might conclude that John 21 is an add-on after what seems to be John's conclusion (20:31, 32), it is not. John narrated *three* post-resurrection appearances. His third and final appearance follows in Chapter 21 (v. 14).

The last verses of Chapter 20 are an appeal to the reader to believe on Jesus and not to be like Thomas who refused to believe unless he personally saw the risen Lord and touched His wounds. Believers are to trust the unseen Lord because of what is revealed in His Word (1 Peter 1:8, 9).

2. Three main divisions of John's Gospel are (1) prologue, 1:1-18; (2) body, 1:19-20:31; and (3) epilogue, 21:1-25. The *prologue* details how Jesus will *manifest* the Father (1:18); the *epilogue* details how Jesus will *manifest* Himself to His followers after His departure (14:21). Thus, John opens the chapter with "*After this ... he revealed himself in this way*" (v. 1). This section is full of *symbolism* in the events John recounts.
3. After the week-long celebration of the Feast of Unleavened Bread, the disciples returned to Galilee, their home. In this chapter we learn the mental state of the disciples after Christ's death and resurrection. They had been with Christ in a close relationship; now there would be a different relationship. Jesus explained how the new relationship works in His "upper room discourse" (Chapters 14–16), but the disciples did not yet understand this relationship. They were also still confused about the kingdom of God (Acts 1:6).

This chapter shows that although Jesus would not be physically with them, He would, as He promised, "*never leave [them] nor forsake [them]*" (Hebrews 13:5). He would continue to govern, guide, and provide for them by His Spirit.

4. John employs *darkness* as a symbol of one's natural spiritual condition (1:5; 3:2; 19-21; 12:35, 46; 13:30; 20:1). Mankind lives in spiritual darkness without the light of Christ (8:12).

The disciples were coming to grips with their resurrected Lord, but they had not fully realized that "*without me you can do nothing*" (15:5).

5. This chapter is not about Jesus' rescuing His discouraged disciple, Peter, thinking that his failures now disqualified him from future usefulness to Christ. It is true that his denial of the Lord caused him deep remorse. He did suffer despondency and failure in his denial. It may be that he also wondered whether this failure would disqualify him from future usefulness in the service to which Jesus had called him. However, no evidence in Scripture or this text states that either Peter or the other disciples were leaving their apostolic calling to return to their old lives. Peter's eagerness to get to shore to be with His Lord argues otherwise.

Peter's fishing expedition was in context of the disciples' returning to Galilee because Jesus had so ordered them (Matthew 28:10: "*Go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee, and there they will see me*"). They went fishing as they were waiting and simply occupying their time. Now, let us examine the text.

I. Christ on the Shore

1. Jesus seemed to have had an affinity for fishermen since seven of the Twelve were involved with that occupation. Humanly speaking, fishermen tend to be persistent in all weather conditions and at all times, even when their work seems futile.
2. The dawn ended their night of futile fishing. Jesus' manifestation came "*as the day was breaking*" (v. 4). He supernaturally withheld identity as He inquired, "*Children [literally, little children] do you have any fish?*" They replied, "*No!*" They took him to be a customer coming to the shore at daybreak to buy the freshly caught fish. However, the customer insisted that they "*cast the net on the right side*" (v. 6). This was not a "maybe-this-will-work" suggestion. It was a command, and it carried a definite promised result—"*you will find some.*" Jesus was again being gracious and merciful to their human condition.

They obeyed and “*were not able to haul it in because of the quantity of the fish*” (v. 6). This was a miracle. John, “*the disciple whom Jesus loved,*” immediately recognized the significance, calling to Peter, “*It is the Lord!*” (v. 7). The identification revealed John’s ready *insight* and Peter’s ready *action*—“*for he was stripped for work, and threw himself into the sea,*” to swim immediately to shore to see His Lord. Peter left the rest to deal with the catch.

II. Christ in the Boat

1. Similarities are very evident between the two fishing expeditions, one at the beginning of Jesus’ earthly ministry and one at the end. Both involved the same lake, the Sea of Tiberias, also known as Gennesaret or the Sea of Galilee, and it was under the same circumstances—fishing all night without catching anything.
2. *Contrasts* also are evident, such as Jesus’ being *in* the boat as contrasted with His being *on* the shore. In Luke 5, Jesus was in the unresurrected flesh, but in John 21, He was in His resurrection body. Note verse 12. They *would* have liked Him to say, “It is I,” but although it was clearly He, they were afraid to ask.

However, Jesus would now relate to His followers differently. He would no longer be with them in a physical sense, but He would still be with them, though unseen. The lesson the Lord would have us take from this is that as they still needed Him and had to rely on Him fully in every situation, so do we.

III. Christ at the Coals

1. The symbolism continues as the disciples, coming ashore, find a charcoal fire and fish cooking on it (v. 9). The following is suggested by A. W. Pink: (1) The scene assures His servants that Christ will care for them. (2) It *leaves* His servants a pattern to follow—in serving others they serve Christ (note Chapter 13). (3) It teaches His servants that in their labors, they still need to be fed and warmed. Finally, (4) Jesus does not depend on the labors of His servants, for He can accomplish His will either with or without them.
2. Jesus asks that they bring some of what they had caught (vv. 10, 11). He now shows them how He will use His own in carrying out His will. He asks Peter to haul the net ashore, symbolic of his being the leader of His gospel work (fishing for men). At Christ’s command, Peter does by himself what six men together could not do in their own strength.
3. The catch was proof that obedience to Christ will be fruitful—they caught a lot of fish, 153 to be exact. The *number* of the fish symbolically foreshadows the success of their approaching work catching men for the kingdom. This was the beginning of successive catches as they cast gospel nets until, “*the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the LORD as the waters cover the sea*” (Habakkuk 2:14; John 10:28).

The lesson here is that success in Christ’s work depends on immediate and implicit obedience empowered by the Spirit and authorized in the divine will.

Finally, Jesus bids them come and dine (vv. 10-13), teaching us that His loving, gracious care and compassion in the days of His humiliation will not change in the day of His glorification. Jesus does not keep His own at a distance, even when they do not perceive His presence. However, as with them, we tend to be reluctant and need constant assurance.

Lessons

1. Peter is the focus of this chapter because he would be central in introducing the gospel. However, he would “disappear” after Acts 13.
2. Peter still operated in his own flesh as seen in his leaving the boat to come to Jesus. Peter abandoned the other men to a difficult task because He was not thinking of others in making his choices. We do that a lot.
3. Much has been made of the Lord’s command to let down the *nets* (plural) in Luke 5; whereas in John 21, *net* is singular. *Nets* vs. *net* probably means nothing. The broken nets reflect Israel’s approach to the kingdom of God and the unbroken net, the gospel approach to the kingdom.