

The Great Catch of Fish

John 21:1-14

John 21:1-14 - *“After these things Jesus showed Himself again to the disciples at the Sea of Tiberias, and in this way He showed Himself: ² Simon Peter, Thomas called the Twin, Nathanael of Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two others of His disciples were together. ³ Simon Peter said to them, “I am going fishing.” They said to him, “We are going with you also.” They went out and immediately got into the boat, and that night they caught nothing.*

⁴ But when the morning had now come, Jesus stood on the shore; yet the disciples did not know that it was Jesus. ⁵ Then Jesus said to them, “Children, have you any food?” They answered Him, “No.”

⁶ And He said to them, “Cast the net on the right side of the boat, and you will find some.” So they cast, and now they were not able to draw it in because of the multitude of fish.

⁷ Therefore that disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, “It is the Lord!” Now when Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he put on his outer garment (for he had removed it), and plunged into the sea. ⁸ But the other disciples came in the little boat (for they were not far from land, but about two hundred cubits), dragging the net with fish. ⁹ Then, as soon as they had come to land, they saw a fire of coals there, and fish laid on it, and bread. ¹⁰ Jesus said to them, “Bring some of the fish which you have just caught.”

¹¹ Simon Peter went up and dragged the net to land, full of large fish, one hundred and fifty-three; and although there were so many, the net was not broken. ¹² Jesus said to them, “Come and eat breakfast.” Yet none of the disciples dared ask Him, “Who are You?”—knowing that it was the Lord. ¹³ Jesus then came and took the bread and gave it to them, and likewise the fish.

¹⁴ This is now the third time Jesus showed Himself to His disciples after He was raised from the dead.”

Background Notes

The events of John 20 took place in Jerusalem, but in chapter 21 the disciples had moved north to Galilee. The setting for this great catch of fish was the Sea of Tiberias, another name for the Sea of Galilee. It was called Tiberias in honor of Tiberius, who was the Roman Emperor at the time. A town named Tiberias was also situated on the lakeshore.

The disciples had been directed to go to Galilee by the message of the angel in Matthew 28:7: *“And go quickly and tell His disciples that He is risen from the dead, and indeed He is going before you into Galilee; there you will see Him. Behold, I have told you.”* So, because of the angel’s message, the disciples had traveled from Jerusalem up to Galilee.

The angel had not directed the disciples to go fishing. For this reason, some commentators find fault with the disciples - in fact, they say that’s the reason why the disciples didn’t catch anything! Well, let’s not be too hard on the disciples! It was only natural for them to return to fishing. After all, that had been their livelihood, and they had normal responsibilities,

just as we do. What about the fact that they didn't catch anything? Well, that's not unusual for fisherman, is it? Have any of you ever gone fishing and caught nothing? I think that we've all had that experience.

When Peter realized that the man calling to them from the shore was the Lord, he put on his outer garment and jumped into the water to come to the Lord. Now that sounds odd, doesn't it? I mean, putting on more clothes to jump into the water? Normally we take outer clothes off when we're going to jump into the water - particularly deep water, and they were about 100 yards from shore. The reason may be that Peter was wearing very little as he labored to catch fish. And for Jews, a greeting was more of a ceremonial or religious act, and thus one should be properly clothed. This was particularly true for Peter, who was meeting the Lord whom he had denied not too many days prior to this time.

Now what about the specific number of fish: 153? Is there any significance to that specific number? Well, maybe the only significance is that fishermen count their fish - and this was a big catch! 153 large fish!

However, we do know that many times specific numbers given in the Bible have a spiritual significance. When I was in seminary, I did a research paper on the various meanings that have been given for the 153 fish down through 2000 years of Church history. You would be amazed at the number and variety of interpretations that have been devised!

Here are a few of them. There were 153 varieties of fish in the Sea of Galilee at that time, representing the variety of those people who would be saved through the gospel. Another one: There were 153 races or tribes in the world at that time. Another: There were 153 languages at that time. Another one: The number 153 represents the Gentiles who will be saved during the Millennium. Another one: 153 is a perfect triangular number!

And on and on we could go with the various interpretations that have been given for this number. Now I know that you're waiting for me to tell you what I think. Well, I'm so sorry! I don't know! Now I'm not saying that there is no spiritual significance to the number 153, but I don't think anyone should be dogmatic on a point like this. Why not? Because the Bible doesn't give us a meaning.

Verse 14 says that this was the third time that Jesus *"showed Himself to His disciples after He was raised from the dead."* That is, it was the third time He appeared to a group of disciples who were gathered together. Certainly the Lord made other appearances. For example, He appeared to the women, and appeared to the two people who were walking along the road to Emmaus.

The first two times when He appeared to His disciples, they were gathered together behind closed doors in Jerusalem. Those appearances were discussed in John 20:19 and 20:26.

Doctrinal / Teaching Points

1. The Lord knows the location of fish.

The Lord called out to them, *"Children, have you any food?" They answered Him, "No." And He said to them, "Cast the net on the right side of the boat, and you will find some." So they cast, and now they were not able to draw it in because of the multitude of fish"* (v5-6).

How did the Lord know that this great number of fish was on the right side of the boat? Because He is the Lord! He is God! He's omniscient, and He knows the location of every fish on the earth.

Not only does the Lord know the location of the literal fish around the world – He knows the location of human "fish"! Certainly in this great event we have a spiritual picture of what it means to become "fishers of men." Success in winning souls for Christ demands that we follow the Lord's instructions, because He knows the location of the "fish."

Are we "fishing all night and catching nothing"? How many fish have you caught recently in your neighborhood? How many fish have you caught recently where you work? How many fish have you caught recently where you go to school? Are you fishing all night, but catching nothing?

The fish are all around the boat, and the Lord knows the location of the fish. I suggest, if we're not doing it now, that we begin to pray specifically about those particular fish that the Lord would have us reach in our neighborhood, or at our job, or at school. The Lord can answer those prayers - because He knows the location of the "fish."

2. The Lord has different ways of catching fish.

As soon as they came to the land, they saw a fire of coals with fish lying on it, and bread (v9-10). And Jesus said to them, *"Bring some of the fish which you have just caught."* Did you notice that there are two categories of fish here - the fish that the Lord had caught and cooked, and the fish that the disciples had caught?

By the way, I wonder how the Lord caught those fish? Did He use a net? Did He have them swim up close to the beach so He could just pick them up? Did He have them jump right out of the water? We don't know - but here's the point.

Continuing to look at the spiritual picture of fishing for souls, I think there's another spiritual truth here. The Lord has different ways of catching fish. In most cases, the Lord uses Christian people as His means to "catch the fish." It is through our witness to other individuals that "fish" are caught. But in other cases, God reaches down and sovereignly catches the fish without any human fisherman, as was the case of the apostle Paul.

Were any of you "caught" in that way? No Christian parents! No preacher! No Sunday school teacher! No Christian friends! No evangelistic service! God just stopped you dead in your tracks and saved you, completely apart from any Christian fisherman?

Most of us have come to Christ the usual way – Christians fulfilling their responsibility to be fishers of men. But the Lord has different ways of catching fish.

Practical Applications

1. Let's accept the Lord's invitation to come and eat breakfast with Him!

Look again at verse 12: *"Jesus said to them, 'Come and eat breakfast.'"* The Lord had prepared a meal for His beloved disciples. He wanted to talk with them, He wanted to hear what they had to say, and He wanted to enjoy fellowship with them. He wanted to commune with them. He wanted to serve them.

I think there's an application here for us. The Lord Jesus wants to get together with us! He desires our fellowship! The Lord wants to commune with us. He wants to serve us and strengthen us.

Let's accept the Lord's invitation to come and "eat breakfast" with Him. What better way to start your day than to have breakfast with the Lord? Of course I'm talking about spending time each day with the Lord – reading His Word, speaking to Him in prayer.

We don't want to get legalistic and lay down rules like "No Bible, no breakfast"! And we don't want to imply that really spiritual people always have their quiet time in the very early morning. But I know that I have found through many years of experience that it is great to spend some time alone with the Lord first thing in the morning.

Read Scripture, let the Lord speak to you, pray and speak to the Lord. Enjoy an early morning time of fellowship and communion with God Himself! Let's accept the Lord's invitation to come and eat breakfast with Him.

2. Let's discuss matters over coffee!

What were the topics of conversation at that early morning breakfast? What was said between the Lord and the disciples? We do know that Peter was restored to the Lord at some point during the meal, and we'll read about that in the second half of the chapter.

But notice - the Lord picked a **mealtime** to discuss matters. He chose the setting of a casual meal for dealing with Peter, who had denied Him. And notice that **first** the Lord **fed** Peter some breakfast - and **then** spoke to him about His spiritual condition!

This is a great pattern to follow. Let's discuss matters over coffee! Meeting for coffee or lunch is an effective way to share the Lord with an unbeliever - or to discuss important matters with brothers and sisters in Christ. Inviting someone to your home for a casual meal is a great time and a great way to counsel and encourage fellow believers.

During this past academic year I had to reprimand one of my students for his bad attitude. Rather than bringing him into my office, sitting him down, and cracking the whip, I sat down with him over a cup of coffee. We talked it over with a cup of coffee. Before the student realized it, he was being reprimanded - but it was done in a congenial setting!

All kinds of matters can be discussed with fellow believers at a mealtime, or over coffee. Let's follow the Lord's example, and discuss matters over coffee!