

TALKS FOR GROWING CHRISTIANS TRANSCRIPT

John 21: 1-14: The Great Catch of Fish

"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^[a] 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 setting for this great catch of fish is 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. The events of John 20 took place in Jerusalem, but now in chapter 21 we are by the shore of the Sea of Galilee. The disciples had been directed 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 it was because of the angel's message that the disciples had come from Jerusalem up into the Galilee area.

The disciples had not been directed by the angel to go fishing. For this reason, some commentators find fault with the disciples at this point -- in fact, they say that is why the disciples didn't catch anything! Well, let's not be too hard on the disciples at this point. 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. The fact that they didn't catch anything? Well, that's not unusual for fisherman. Have any of you ever gone fishing and didn't catch anything? I think that we've all had that experience.

In verse 7 we read that when Peter realized that it was the Lord calling to them from the shore, he put on his outer garment and jumped into the water to come to the Lord. Now

that seems odd, doesn't it? I mean, putting on more clothes to jump into the water? Normally we take outer clothes off when we are going to jump into the water -- particularly deep water, and they were 200 cubits (about 100 yards) from shore. So what's going on here? Well, for Jews, a greeting was more of a religious or ceremonial act, and thus one should be fully 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 one hundred and fifty-three fish (v11)? Is there any significance to that number? Well, maybe the only significance is that fishermen count their fish -- and this was a great catch, 153 large fish! However, we do know that many times the numbers given in the Bible have a spiritual significance. I remember doing a research paper when I was at seminary on the number of fish in John 21. You would be amazed at the number and variety of interpretations that have been given, down through 2000 years of church history, as to the meaning of the 153 fish!

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 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 to 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! It is beyond me! 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 because the Bible doesn't give the meaning.

One more background note here: In v14 we read 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 gathered together. Certainly the Lord had other appearances -- for example, He appeared to the women and to the two men on the road to Emmaus. The first two times when He appeared to His disciples gathered together were the appearances behind closed doors in Jerusalem that we covered in John 20:19 and 20:26.

Doctrinal / Teaching Points

1. The Lord knows the location of fish.

In verses 5-6, we read that the Lord called out 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.*" 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**, 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.

In verse 9-10 we read that as soon as they came to the land, they saw a fire of coals with fish lying on it and bread. Jesus said to them, "*Bring some of the fish which you have just caught.*" Do you notice that there are two categories of fish here -- the fish that the Lord had caught 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 on the beach and He could just pick them up? Did He have them jump right out of the water and fly over to the fire? We can't be sure, but here's the point. As we continue to look at the spiritual picture of fishing for souls, I think we see another spiritual truth -- the Lord has different ways of catching fish. In most cases, the Lord uses Christian people as a means to catch the "fish." It is through our witness to individuals that "fish" are caught. But in other cases, God's 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! No, 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 wanted to talk with them, to hear what they had to say, 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 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? I'm talking here about a daily quiet time with the Lord -- reading His Word, speaking to Him in prayer. We don't want to get legalistic and imply that we must have our quiet time in the early morning if we're really spiritual, but I know that I have found through many years of experience that it is great to get alone with the Lord the first thing in the morning. Read Scripture, let the Lord speak to you, pray and speak to the Lord -- an early morning time and 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.

We don't know all the conversation that took place between the Lord and the disciples at this early morning breakfast. We do know that Peter was restored at this time -- we'll read about that in the second half of the chapter. But notice that the Lord picked a **meal time** to discuss matters -- even the matter of dealing with Peter, who had denied Him. And notice that He **fed Peter first**, and **then** spoke to him about His spiritual condition.

This is a great pattern to follow. Let's discuss matters over coffee! Using a mealtime or coffee time is an effective way to share the things of the Lord or to discuss important matters with brothers and sisters in Christ. It's a great time and a great way to counsel and exhort 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 over a cup of coffee. Before he knew 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 discuss matters over coffee!