

“Fishing For & From the Fisher of Men” (Jn. 21:1-14)

1. Fishing for Fish (1-3)
 - a. Disciples (1-2) They gather as instructed at the rendezvous point (Mat. 28:7; Mk. 16:7).
 - b. Decision (3) May as well do something productive and familiar. So they fish while waiting for Jesus. Not a bad thing to do while waiting. David was told not to build the Temple yet he did much for preparation. Waiting doesn't equate to doing nothing.
 - c. Duty: There is nothing wrong with common vocation because we are called to such. We must, however, understand that we are also given the honor of spiritual employment. We are stewards of the King and contribute to the fishing of men. Doing your job(s) well is actually an effective “lure” for a Gospel “catch.”
2. The Fishermen and Fisher of Men (4-14)
 - a. Calling (4-6)
 - i. Jesus called out to them like “You lads haven't caught breakfast have you?” Or, “You ‘boys’ haven't caught a ‘bite’ have you?” See Informal Lingo at **Further Study** below.
 - ii. After a nil response, He instructed them to cast to the starboard. Now at the very least, they may have been discouraged and might have been tempted to be exasperated by one's instructions from shore to simply cast the net once more on the other side.
 - iii. Now after professionals fished all night they are told to merely cast the net on the other side of the boat. N. T. Wright noted, “They knew, as fishermen do know, that if you don't make a catch at night you're far less likely to by day.”¹
 - iv. Nevertheless, they obey and are rewarded.
 - b. Catch (6)
 - i. What may come to mind (and as many commentators point out) is Jn. 15:5 which is not to be taken completely literally, yet has implications of being absolutely perfectly literal. →
 - ii. Because they obeyed they had a great catch of fish. The point is not that without Jesus you can't fish or do natural things as all people of the earth do. The point is that if you trust Jesus, you will do great things He has prepared for you. Many preachers do much w/o Jesus but they are doing nothing good, righteous, beneficial, or obedient without obeying His commands.
 - iii. Bruce Milne offered this insight: “This story has much to say to current practice in evangelism. The church in the western world has never had such an array of helps, resources and methodologies as at present. The psychological and sociological sciences, as well as the fruits of the technological and communications revolution, have been plundered for secrets of successful mission. Sadly, although much time and money are often spent acquiring these tools or attending the inevitable conferences and seminars where they are unveiled, the long-term results are commonly meagre... Interestingly, by contrast, the churches of the Third World are, by and large, uninformed concerning these new discoveries and ‘success’ methodologies. In their poverty and weakness they have to rely on prayer for the power of God and the simple direct sharing of the gospel. The results are often remarkable. Christianity in some Third World areas appears to be growing almost out of control. Obviously there are massive generalizations involved in these observations (though they are made from first-hand experience on several continents). The trouble with the ‘know-how’

¹ Wright, T. (2004). [*John for Everyone, Part 2: Chapters 11-21*](#) (pp. 156–157). Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge.

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of the western churches is not the knowledge in itself, in most cases, but the insidious temptation *to trust in it*.”²

- iv. There is abundance in obedience. Conventional wisdom may be true and effective but often times, following/obeying Jesus is counter intuitive and counter cultural (e.g. Lu. 5:5).
- c. Comprehension (7-9)
 - i. John was quick to believe and, indeed, this parallels his and Peter’s reactions at the tomb (20:5-6). John believed immediately and Peter acted immediately.
 - ii. Another parallel event where after an all-nighter w/o a catch, Jesus instructed as here and they could not pull in the nets w/o tearing them. Yet Peter responded quite differently (Lu. 5:8). There, Peter was coming to see that Jesus was more than a mere man. Here, however, Peter realized Jesus is LORD and that restoration is, in fact, why Jesus had died and rose.
 - iii. A third parallel is seen by the coal fire (9). In vv. 15ff. Jesus asks Peter thrice if He loves him and in 18:17-18 we see that Peter thrice denied Jesus by a fire of coals.
- d. Contribution (10) Though Jesus had some ready breakfast on the fire, He instructed them to contribute. What a privilege to bring forth the fruit of our labors to sup with Jesus.
- e. Completion (11)
 - i. A secure catch. Lose not one. Here, the echoes of chapter ten emerge.
 - 1. Sheep must enter the door and listen/obey His voice.
 - 2. None of His sheep will be lost.
 - ii. A large catch
 - 1. The sheep fold will expand from other folds
 - 2. Like the expansion of folds into one fold in Jn. 10, the 153 count likely conveys the same. See also Ezek. 47:9-10 where the healing and life-giving waters flow from the eschatological Temple (Christ) to all the earth reaching all fish – making them of one kind. See **153 Fish** in **Further Study**.
 - 3. The safest understanding seeks not to force a supposed layered meaning by the number of count. Submitting the number showed merely (or at least) that the number was so great that they, indeed, counted them.
 - 4. My conclusion is expressed concisely by C. K. Barrett: “they draw in the catch which represents the fullness of the church.”³
- f. Communion (12-14)
 - i. Invitation (12) “Come and eat breakfast.” I’d rather be invited by no one else to sup with than Jesus!
 - ii. Note the syntax. The wording reveals a hesitance, a curiosity, a wonder. It’s as if the Disciples want to ask, “Is it really you?” Re: Jesus’ appearance; Wright explained, “We have no means of knowing. We are in the same position that someone in the sixteenth century would have been in if they’d been shown a computer logging on to the Internet. They hadn’t got electricity in those days, let alone microchips! The difference between our present body and Jesus’ risen body is like that only more so. This is a whole new world. It isn’t magic. It isn’t ghostly. It’s real, but it’s different.

² Milne, B. (1993). *The message of John: here is your king!: with study guide* (p. 312). InterVarsity Press.

³ Barrett, C. K. (1978). *Gospel according to St John: An Introduction with Commentary and Notes on the Greek Text* (Second Edition, p. 578). SPCK.

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God help us if we ever imagine that our normal everyday world is the sum total of all that there is. What a dull, flat, boring idea.”⁴

- iii. The disciples were in a state of awe and almost disbelief yet they did believe and ultimately realize it was Jesus.
- iv. To sup with – enjoy communion – and even just be invited to do so with Christ is the honor of all honors.
- v. V. 13 is not the memorial of Communion per se but it certainly mirrors the description.
- vi. V. 14 Revelation inclusio: “That there was in the Evangelist’s mind some evidential value in this episode in support of Jesus’ resurrection is confirmed by this verse, which forms a literary *inclusio* (cf. notes on 1:18) with v. 1. John writes that *Jesus appeared to his disciples*: the verb (*ephanerōthē*) is the passive form of the verb used in v. 1, lit. ‘Jesus was revealed’ or ‘Jesus was manifested’. As in v. 1, the emphasis is on Jesus’ self-disclosure. The verb is stronger than the more common *ōphthē* (‘he appeared’), used more commonly in the New Testament (e.g. Lk. 24:34; 1 Cor 15:5–8).”⁵
- vii. When it became known to Peter that Jesus was on shore, he left the convenience of the boat, the catch, dryness, etc. jumped in the water and swam straight to Jesus. Is Jesus your highest priority? Are you at home with Jesus?
- viii. Summary: There is a question, call, and invitation from (12), a provision of (13), and a communion with (13-14) Jesus.
 1. Inquiry: Do you have ...?
 2. Call: Trust Me.
 3. Invitation: Come sup with me.
 4. Provision: I’ll provide and you can contribute.
 5. Communion: Fellowship is an end and we can have it now in a real sense. In fact, Jesus promised such some 40 days later just before His ascension. Read Mat. 28:16-20.
 6. These realities here are reinforced when again they were instructed to return to that place and where Jesus once again affirms His ultimate authority, their commission, and in the meantime, continued communion with Jesus till the end of the age.
- ix. This passage offers us encouragement as well. As sung in the hymn “Great is Thy Faithfulness,” we have, “strength for today and bright hope for tomorrow.”

Further Study

Informal Lingo

The word *paidia* (niv ‘Friends’, frequently ‘children’) can be used much like British ‘lads’ or American ‘boys’ or ‘guys’ (cf. M. I. 170 n. 1). The word rendered ‘fish’ (*prosphegion*) is used only here in the New Testament. Strictly speaking it refers to a bit of something to eat, a titbit, which in the Galilean

⁴ Wright, T. (2004). *John for Everyone, Part 2: Chapters 11-21* (p. 161). Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge.

⁵ Carson, D. A. (1991). *The Gospel according to John* (pp. 674–675). Inter-Varsity Press; W.B. Eerdmans.

NIV New International Version.

M. I. J. H. Moulton, W. F. Howard, and Nigel Turner, *Grammar of New Testament Greek*, 4 vols. (T. & T. Clark, 1908–76).

culture would often be a bit of fish. The *mē* that introduces the question expresses doubt or expects a negative answer: ‘Lads, haven’t you caught anything?’⁶

Peter’s clothing

One does not normally put *on* a garment before swimming. The words rendered *for he had taken it off* are, literally, ‘for he was naked (*gymnos*)’. If, as some think, Peter was totally naked or nearly so (*gymnos* could mean either), he may have donned his *outer garment* (*ependytēs*), even though it would impede his limbs. Alternatively, he was wearing nothing but the ‘outer garment’ while he was fishing, loosely draped around him, and before jumping into the water *he wrapped [it] around him, i.e.* he tucked up the lower part of the garment and either knotted it or fastened it with his girdle in order not to restrict his legs (the verb is *diezōsato*—the same verb is used to describe Jesus tying a towel around his waist preparatory to washing his disciples’ feet, 13:4, 5).⁷

153 Fish

Throughout the history of the church, the most popular solution is that advanced by Jerome, who in his commentary on Ezekiel 47 ties this miracle with the prophetic vision of the stream of living water that flows from the temple to the Dead Sea, which begins to teem with life. Jerome cites the naturalist Oppian who, he claims, avers that there are 153 different species of fish. Thus this catch of fish, effected by the risen Lord’s command, becomes an acted parable of the fruitful mission of the church that draws (*helkyō*; the same verb is behind ‘dragged’) all human beings without distinction (12:32).⁸ The trouble with this explanation is that Oppian’s list, no matter how it is counted, does not yield 153; the most likely number is 157.⁹ Scholars debate whether Jerome was simply mistaken in the number, misascribed the right number to some other naturalist whose work is now lost, or simply ‘cooked the books’. So far as our evidence goes, however, this is no solution.

Another proposal based on Ezekiel 47 has been put forward more recently. Describing the effect of the stream from the temple, Ezekiel writes: ‘There will be large numbers of fish, because this water flows there and makes the salt water fresh; so where the river flows everything will live. Fishermen will stand along the shore; from En Gedi to En Eglaim there will be places for spreading nets’ (47:9–10). Now each Hebrew and Greek letter stands for a number, so every Greek or Hebrew word has a numerical value. Based on this discipline, called ‘gematria’, J. A. Emerton¹⁰ has noted that in Hebrew ‘En’ is the word for ‘spring’, while ‘Gedi’ yields the number 17 and ‘Eglaim’ the number 153. Indeed, the two numbers are related: 153 is the triangular number of 17 (i.e. 1+2+3+ ... +17=153; for the reason why it is called ‘triangular’ cf. Hoskyns, p. 553). Thus the number represents the places where, in the time of the fulfillment of messianic hopes, gospel fishermen are to spread their nets. Of course, this ‘solution’ supposes that the readers understand Hebrew. That is extremely unlikely in a book where elementary Hebrew words have to be transliterated (e.g. 1:37, 41). P. R. Ackroyd, noting this point, has derived 153 by adding the Greek numbers for ‘Gedi’ and ‘Eglaim’, but to do so he has had to find variant spellings in different manuscripts.¹¹

⁶ Carson, D. A. (1991). *The Gospel according to John* (p. 670). Inter-Varsity Press; W.B. Eerdmans.

⁷ Carson, D. A. (1991). *The Gospel according to John* (p. 671). Inter-Varsity Press; W.B. Eerdmans.

⁸ Jerome, *Commentaria in Ezichielem, Lib. xiv, Cap. 47*; cf. PL 26. 474C.

⁹ Cf. Robert M. Grant, *HTR* 42, 1949, pp. 273–275.

¹⁰ *JTS* 9, 1958, pp. 86–89.

Hoskyns E. C. Hoskyns, *The Fourth Gospel*, edited by F. N. Davey (Faber and Faber, 1954).

¹¹ *JTS* 10, 1959, p. 10. J. A. Emerton (*JTS* 11, 1960, pp. 329–336) himself pointed out the difficulty of having to choose spellings from different manuscripts. More recent discussion (Bruce Grigsby, *ExpT* 95, 1984, pp. 177–178) has not escaped the problem of assuming a strongly semitic readership.

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That 153 is the triangular number of 17 **did not escape the church Fathers. Augustine**¹² noted it, and observed that $17=10+7$, the 10 representing the ten commandments and the 7 the sevenfold Spirit of God (Rev. 1:4). Others break 7 down into $3+4$, the number of the Trinity and the number of the new Jerusalem, the city built foursquare. Others have observed that $153=(3 \times 50)+3$, the double 3 pointing to the Trinity. Another scholar observes that in the feeding of the five thousand there were originally five little loaves of bread, from which twelve baskets of scraps were taken up, and $5+12=17$ —*i.e.* there is a link between that (allegedly) eucharistic feast and this one.¹³ Other solutions based on gematria have presented themselves: that 153 is the number for the words ‘the church of love’ in Hebrew,¹⁴ or of ‘the children of God’,¹⁵ or of Pisgah (thus making an allusion to the death of Moses, Dt. 34:1),¹⁶ or of the Hebrew for ‘Cana G’ (representing ‘Cana in Galilee’, and thereby tying this miracle to the first two).¹⁷⁸

¹² *In Johan. Tract.* 122.

¹³ So M. Rissi, *ThZ* 35, 1979, pp. 73–89.

¹⁴ D. R. Ahrendts, *ZWT* 41, 1898, p. 480.

¹⁵ J. A. Romeo, *JBL* 97, 1978, pp. 263–264.

¹⁶ O. T. Owen, *ExpT* 100, 1988, pp. 52–54; but *cf.* J. M. Ross, *ExpT* 100, 1989, p. 375.

¹⁷ M. Oberweis, *ZNW* 77, 1986, pp. 236–241.

⁸ Carson, D. A. (1991). [*The Gospel according to John*](#) (pp. 672–673). Inter-Varsity Press; W.B. Eerdmans.