

EPILOGUE: JESUS APPEARS TO SEVEN DISCIPLES

JOHN CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

John 21:1-14 (HCSB):

¹ *After this, Jesus revealed Himself again to His disciples by the Sea of Tiberias. He revealed Himself in this way:*

² *Simon Peter, Thomas (called “Twin”), Nathanael from Cana of Galilee, Zebedee’s sons, and two others of His disciples were together.*

³ *“I’m going fishing,” Simon Peter said to them. “We’re coming with you,” they told him. They went out and got into the boat, but that night they caught nothing.*

⁴ *When daybreak came, Jesus stood on the shore. However, the disciples did not know it was Jesus.*

⁵ *“Men,” Jesus called to them, “you don’t have any fish, do you?” “No,” they answered.*

⁶ *“Cast the net on the right side of the boat,” He told them, “and you’ll find some.” So they did, and they were unable to haul it in because of the large number of fish.*

⁷ *Therefore the disciple, the one Jesus loved, said to Peter, “It is the Lord!” When Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he tied his outer garment around him (for he was stripped) and plunged into the sea.*

⁸ *But since they were not far from land (about 100 yards away), the other disciples came in the boat, dragging the net full of fish.*

⁹ *When they got out on land, they saw a charcoal fire there, with fish lying on it, and bread.*

¹⁰ *“Bring some of the fish you’ve just caught,” Jesus told them.*

¹¹ *So Simon Peter got up and hauled the net ashore, full of large fish—**153** of them. **Even though there were so many, the net was not torn.***

¹² *“Come and have breakfast,” Jesus told them. None of the disciples dared ask Him, “Who are You?” because they knew it was the Lord.*

¹³ *Jesus came, took the bread, and gave it to them. He did the same with the fish.*

¹⁴ *This was now the third time Jesus appeared to the disciples after He was raised from the dead.*

“The Methodist missionary to India, Bishop Thoburn was walking down the street when a large feather of an eagle drifted to the ground. He searched the sky for the eagle, but there was no eagle. Turning the feather over and over in his hands, he recalled that pens made out of such feathers had written historic documents.

“He then took a sharp knife and sliced across the heavy end of the feather. It wrote so beautifully he decided on the spur of the moment to write a letter to his sister in Boston. He wrote of something which was in his mind for a long time. He told of how mistreated and neglected the girls and women of India were and that he felt God would hold us responsible if we did nothing about it.

“Then he added: “You are a school teacher. Although you are excellent, there are thousands of others in America who could take your place. Why don’t you come over here and start a school for the girls and women who come to my compound to church?”

“She read it to the Women’s Missionary Society of the church. Spontaneously the members responded. They told Thoburn’s sister if she would go, they would finance the whole project. Thus started the first Christian school for girls in India. Today it is a huge institution.”¹

Could it be that Jesus was showing the apostles to whom He was about to entrust His Church that if they obeyed Him they would become such successful fishers of men that their nets would be filled to overflowing, and that the catch would be beyond any expectation they could have had. We think so. We believe that Jesus is sending the same message to all believers today. But the essential ingredient here is submission to the commands of the Master. Are you willing to do that. Perhaps a little better understanding of this chapter will help you to make a total commitment. We hope so.

Another major purpose of this chapter was to convince the Apostle Peter as well as his fellow apostles that he had been forgiven by Jesus for denying Him at the time of Jesus’ arrest and that Peter was once again held in the highest trust by Jesus and would play a major role in the establishment of Christ’s Church. Peter knew He had failed His Lord in His hour of need and Peter may very well have thought that his days as a trusted apostle were over. But Jesus showed Peter no less love after his failure than before. We wish you could get the full understanding here. Have you ever felt that you have messed up so badly in life, that your sin has been so great that you could never be fully forgiven and given another chance. That is nothing but a lie from Satan. The Word of God has told us that if we confess our sins He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness (1 John 1:9). It does not matter who the sinner is, or what the

¹ Tan, Paul Lee: *Encyclopedia of 7700 Illustrations : A Treasury of Illustrations, Anecdotes, Facts and Quotations for Pastors, Teachers and Christian Workers*. Garland TX : Bible Communications, 1996, c1979.

sins were, when the person comes to God confessing it and asking forgiveness, he/she can be totally confident that they will receive total and unqualified forgiveness. Communion with God is fully restored.

Jesus surely decided to deal with Peter in this public way so that the others might know that Peter had regained Jesus' trust and confidence completely. In fact, in order to demonstrate this trust, Jesus commissioned Peter to feed the sheep and lambs of His flock. Now that is trust!

Now let us take that closer look.

John 21:1-2 (HCSB):

¹ *After this, Jesus revealed Himself again to His disciples by the Sea of Tiberius (Sea of Galilee).² He revealed Himself in this way:*

² *Simon Peter, Thomas (called "Twin"), Nathanael from Cana of Galilee, Zebedee's sons, and two others of His disciples were together.*

Imagine yourself an apostle in this situation. You had seen the risen Lord on a couple of previous occasions. Now you had obeyed His command to go to Galilee where He would meet you. But you were quite uncertain what the future would hold. You felt restless. After all, this business about rising from the dead and having a glorified body fit for Heaven must have still been an overwhelming experience to these apostles. If you will remember when Christ went up on the mountain and was transfigured in His resurrected glory before Peter, James, and John, He radiated a brilliant light.

Matthew 17:2 (NASB):

² *And He was transfigured before them; and His face shone like the sun, and His garments became as white as light.*

Would Jesus' appearance have been similar to that at the **Transfiguration** as He appeared to His disciples after His resurrection. That claim might be debatable to some. Some would say no because when Jesus appeared to the two men on the road to Emmaus nothing was said about Jesus glowing like the sun (Luke 24:13 ff.). But if we look closer, verse 16 says: "*But their eyes were prevented from recognizing Him.*" Even in the passage we are studying, you would think the apostles would notice if the person calling to them from the shore was surrounded by a brilliant light. So it may be here too that Jesus prevented them from seeing His full glory. But then we remember when Jesus appeared to Paul on the Damascus Road, Paul was blinded by the brilliant light.

Well, even though we would all like a concrete answer here, we do not believe there is anything in Scripture that will answer this question one way or the other, but we do know one thing for certain, and that is that Jesus at this point was noticeably different than any other human being on earth if for no other reason than He was able to appear and disappear at will out of thin air. Such powers would suggest that He no longer walked wherever He was going. All He had to do was say "*Appear with the disciples in a room*

² Parentheses mine.

in Jerusalem,” and He would be there. Then He could say, “*Appear on the shore at the Sea of Galilee,*” and instantly He would be there. So there can be little if any doubt that the disciples had been introduced here to the world of the supernatural and they did not really understand what it was all going to come to.

William Hendriksen, *Baker New Testament Commentary – Exposition of the Gospel According to John*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1953), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, 476-478.

The Sea of Galilee is very much a part of Jesus’ ministry. It is a familiar place to most of these men. Jesus had asked them to go up into Galilee where He would meet them. So we find them here waiting for Jesus. They may have waited and waited for Jesus to come. Peter would be the one to become impatient, and after pacing back and forth and after looking up and down the shore, he would be the one to say, *I’m going fishing.*” And six others joined him.³

J. Vernon McGee, *Thru The Bible with J. Vernon McGee*, (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1983), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, Under: "Chapter 21".

John 21:3-5 HCSB:

³ “*I’m going fishing,*” Simon Peter said to them. “*We’re coming with you,*” they told him. *They went out and got into the boat, but that night they caught nothing.*

⁴ *When daybreak came, Jesus stood on the shore. However, the disciples did not know it was Jesus.*

⁵ “*Men,*” Jesus called to them, “*you don’t have any fish, do you?*” “*No,*” they answered.

They fished all night and caught nothing. These men fished all night, and **they caught nothing**. They had been restless before, and now they are restless and frustrated. It is a joy to fish when you catch fish and frustrating when you do not. They all knew how to fish because that is the way they made their living. Therefore as professional fishermen they must have really been frustrated after fishing all night and not catching a thing. But there can be little doubt that their run of bad luck that night had been carefully planned by Jesus for a very specific purpose.

Now as the sun came up and morning was breaking, there was Jesus standing on the shore. It is very possible that in the early morning light it was not possible for them to recognize who was standing on the shore. If you have ever been on a body of water at sunrise, you know that the sun can create a glare reflecting off the surface of the water. This may have also impaired their ability to distinguish clearly the figure on the shore.

So at this point the apostles do not know that this is Jesus, and Jesus called out to them,

³ J. Vernon McGee, *Thru The Bible with J. Vernon McGee*, (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1983), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, Under: "Chapter 21".

“*You don’t have any fish do you?*” They must have been somewhat embarrassed. Here they are professional fishermen and they have to admit to some stranger that they did not catch a single fish. But they must have thought it strange how this stranger knew they did not have any fish. They were a hundred yards offshore and it was in that early morning light. How could He tell they had not caught anything?

John 21:6-7 HCSB:

⁶ *“Cast the net on the right side of the boat,” He told them, “and you’ll find some.” So they did, and they were unable to haul it in because of the large number of fish.*

⁷ *Therefore the disciple, the one Jesus loved, said to Peter, “It is the Lord!” When Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he tied his outer garment around him (for he was stripped) and plunged into the sea.*

While they might have been contemplating that question, Jesus, who was still unknown to the disciples told them to throw out their net on the right side of the boat and they would catch some fish. So what did they have to lose? They had not caught anything by their own efforts so they threw the net out on the right side of the boat, and guess what happened? Immediately there were so many fish in the net that it was a struggle to haul it in. Under ordinary circumstances the net would have ripped apart because of the heavy load, but of course this was not a normal circumstance. Jesus had a message He wanted to make indelibly clear in the minds of these men.

Suddenly, John recognized Jesus and said to Peter, “It is the Lord!” Now we know that Peter was a pretty impulsive guy, and when he heard that it was Jesus standing on the shore he grabbed the first piece of clothing he could get his hands on to cover him and jumped into the water. He could not wait to get to Jesus. Now I do not know for certain if it was the custom of fishermen at that time to fish in the nude, but I suppose it is possible. The other possibility is that Peter could have been stripped down to a very basic covering while he was fishing and needed to put something else on to make himself somewhat presentable to Jesus. That fact simply does not have any impact on the meaning of this text.

John 21:8 HCSB:

⁸ *But since they were not far from land (about 100 yards away), the other disciples came in the boat, dragging the net full of fish.*

Now perhaps the lesson Jesus meant for them to understand may have begun taking place.

As they climbed out of the boat they may have begun putting two and two together. They had been out fishing all night and could not accomplish anything at all under their own self-reliance. Then Jesus shows up and tells them what to do, they obey, and experience what was probably the single biggest catch of their lives. They probably were beginning to understand that if they obeyed Jesus, they would be able to catch many unbelievers and under the power of the Holy Spirit bring them into the boat, the Kingdom of God. If they tried to do it under their own power they would fail miserably. That truth is the same

today as it was that day on the shores of the Sea of Galilee. We are never far from success when we permit Jesus to give the orders, when we are obedient to His Word and remain in His will, and we are usually closer to success than we realize. We are indeed "*fishers of men*" (Matthew 4:19), and there are "*fish*" all around us. If we obey His directions, we will catch the fish. That is the promise Jesus wanted to instill in these men and that is the promise He wants to instill in us.

“Earlier, Mary recognized Jesus when he called her name, and the disciples recognized him through his wounds. Now he is recognized through the abundance that comes through obedience to his word.”⁴

John 21:9-14 HCSB:

⁹ *When they got out on land, they saw a charcoal fire there, with fish lying on it, and bread.*

¹⁰ *“Bring some of the fish you’ve just caught,” Jesus told them.*

¹¹ *So Simon Peter got up and hauled the net ashore, full of large fish—153 of them. Even though there were so many, the net was not torn.*

¹² *“Come and have breakfast,” Jesus told them. None of the disciples dared ask Him, “Who are You?” because they knew it was the Lord.*

¹³ *Jesus came, took the bread, and gave it to them. He did the same with the fish.*

¹⁴ *This was now the third time Jesus appeared to the disciples after He was raised from the dead.*

Now let us pause for a moment to see what is actually going on here. Here is the risen Christ, the God of Heaven, and he has prepared a shore breakfast for His apostles. It never seems to fail that we find Jesus in the role of a servant. And how generous and loving it was to feed Peter before He dealt with Peter’s spiritual needs. He gave Peter the opportunity to dry off, get warm, satisfy his hunger, and enjoy some fellowship. This is a good example for us to follow as we care for God's people. Do you love to serve others or do you love to be served? One whom is walking in fellowship with Christ delights to obey and delights to serve. Certainly the spiritual is more important than the physical, but caring for the physical can prepare the way for spiritual ministry. Jesus does not so emphasize "*the soul*" that He neglects the body.⁵

A good argument can be presented for the idea that here in verse 9 we should translate **a fish** and **a bread-cake** instead of the indefinite "*fish and bread*," which must be admitted is also a possible interpretation. Verse 13 seems to indicate that there was only *one* bread-cake (note the definite article) and only *one* fish. Besides, the striking similarity between John 21:13 and John 6:11, the story of feeding 5,000 with five loaves and two fish, seems to imply that in both cases we are dealing with a miracle of multiplication. Jesus was a

⁴ Rodney A. Whitacre, *The IVP New Testament Commentary Series – John*, ed. Grant R. Osborne (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, 491-492.

⁵ Warren W. Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary – New Testament, Volume 1*, (Colorado Springs, CO: Victor, 2001), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, 397.

supernatural being as well as a human being. He did not have to concern Himself with portion control. You can probably recall a number of other stories in the Bible where God and Jesus just kept providing more and more from a very meager source.

So then why did Jesus find it necessary to ask them to bring some of the fish they just caught? Well, we think it is because He wanted them to see first hand the size of the fish they caught and just what an incredible catch it was. Jesus did not need the fish because He could not provide enough for everyone's breakfast. He wanted them to see, feel, and smell the reality of this miracle that had occurred so that they would never forget it.

There is actually another miracle described in John 21:11, and that is that Jesus prevented the net from tearing under this extremely heavy load which would have torn under normal circumstances.

Jesus then invites them to have breakfast and by this time no one needed to ask Him who He was because they all knew He was the Lord.