

The Gospel of John (120) **The Lord Jesus appears a third time to His Disciples (1)**

In the last chapter of John's Gospel we read of a third appearance of the risen Lord Jesus to His disciples. As this chapter unfolds, we read of the life and ministry of Jesus on earth being completed and concluded, even as it gives way to the onset of the life and ministry of His disciples to the world.¹ And so, although this chapter concludes the account of the Fourth Gospel, the story of the Fourth Gospel continues on in that the Lord calls and recommissions His disciples for their mission to declare the gospel of salvation to the world.

The entire chapter records the details of this third resurrection appearance to His disciples, but does so through two distinguishable events. A transition in emphasis takes place from the first to the second of these two events. In verses 1 through 14 we read of Jesus revealing Himself to seven of His disciples, after they had not initially recognized Him. They then dine together on the shore of Galilee. And then in verses 15 through 25 we read of our Lord restoring and reinstating Peter to his responsible role as an apostle and also of Jesus foretelling some future details of the lives of both Peter and John. This concludes the Gospel proper, but lays before the reader the future mission of taking the gospel to the world, even until Jesus returns.

Here is **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: ²Simon Peter, Thomas called the Twin, Nathanael of Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two others of His disciples were together. ³Simon 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. ⁴But when the morning had now come, Jesus stood on the shore; yet the disciples did not know that it was Jesus. ⁵Then Jesus said to them, "Children, have you any food?"

They answered Him, "No."

⁶And 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.

⁷Therefore 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. ⁸But 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. ⁹Then, as soon as they had come to land, they saw a fire of coals there, and fish laid on it, and bread. ¹⁰Jesus said to them, "Bring some of the fish which you have just caught."

¹¹Simon 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. ¹²Jesus said to them, "Come and eat breakfast." Yet none of the disciples dared ask Him, "Who are You?"—knowing that it was the Lord. ¹³Jesus then came and took the bread and gave it to them, and likewise the fish.

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

We may set forth the contents of the first of these final two episodes using the following outline:

1. The fishermen without fish (vs. 1-3)

¹ Edward Klink divides and describes the contents of this chapter in this way: (1) The Mission of the Church: Jesus and the Fishermen (vs.1-14), and the Ministers of the Church: Peter's reinstatement and the Beloved Disciple's Testimony (vs. 15-25).

2. The disciples without Jesus (vs. 4-6)
3. The disciples recognize Jesus (vs. 7-8)
4. Jesus and His disciples fellowship together, sharing a meal (vs. 9-14)

We should first say a few words about the chapter itself before we begin to examine its details. You will commonly read or hear of those scholars who deny that John 21 was the original conclusion to this Gospel, that it had not been penned by the author of the first 21 chapters. They give a number of arguments, but they all seem to begin with the assumption that 20:30 and 31 bring the gospel to its fitting conclusion. These verses read,

³⁰And truly Jesus did many other signs in the presence of His disciples, which are not written in this book; ³¹but these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name.

These scholars reason that an unknown writer appended the contents of chapter 21 onto the Gospel at a later time. Most conservative interpreters argue, of course, that John penned chapter 21 as he had the previous 20 chapters of this Gospel. There are many arguments presented on both sides, but what is quite convincing is that there is no known manuscript of John in which the contents of chapter 21 are not included. **Donald Carson** (b. 1947) addressed this ahead of his comments on the details of this chapter:

There is no textual evidence that the book was ever published without John 21. Certainly if the first twenty chapters of the book had been published for a few years before chapter 21 was added, one would expect significant textual evidence of such independent circulation... The evidence in favour of an originally integral Gospel incorporating chapter 21 seems reasonably firm, and that view is presupposed in the exposition that follows.²

Let us now work through the details of the first 14 verses of this chapter and consider their meaning and implications for our understanding of the faith and how we are to live for and before our Lord in the days in which we are living.

I. The fishermen without fish (vs. 1-3)

After these things Jesus showed Himself again to the disciples at the Sea of Tiberias, and in this way He showed Himself: ²Simon Peter, Thomas called the Twin, Nathanael of Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two others of His disciples were together. ³Simon 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.

John opened this concluding chapter with the words, “*After these things.*” There is no specific time frame suggested by these words other than declaring that the events recorded here took place sometime after the appearances recorded in John 20. There is no indication how long a period of time passed between our Lord appearing to His eleven apostles on the second Lord’s Day after His resurrection and His appearance to them recorded here. But some time is suggested by the fact that there was considerable distance traveled by these men from where they had last met with Jesus.

We read that “*Jesus showed Himself again to the disciples at the Sea of Tiberias.*” The Sea of Tiberias is another name for the Sea of Galilee. This title, the Sea of Tiberias, is only found in John’s Gospel. It was a name for the Sea of Galilee later in the first century. The Roman city of Tiberias was

² Donald Carson, **The Gospel According to John** (William B. Eerdmans. 1991), p. 667f.

founded on the western shore of Galilee in AD 20, which led to the name change of the lake.³ John wrote His Gospel primarily for Gentile readers. The name of the lake as Tiberias would have been more recognizable to them than Galilee.

And so, the disciples had returned to their home region of Galilee. They probably journeyed the 90 miles from Jerusalem shortly after the conclusion of the seven days of the Feast of Unleavened Bread. That feast had begun with the Passover, the day that our Savior had been arrested in Jerusalem, and ended probably just before the second Lord's Day on which our Lord had met with His disciples in Jerusalem. They would again travel to Jerusalem before long, for there they witnessed the ascension of their Savior as recorded in Acts 1. And of course there they experienced the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost, which was 50 days after the Passover, or ten days after our Lord's ascension unto His heavenly throne.

The record of the risen Lord Jesus to His disciples *in Galilee*, as recorded in the Gospels of Mark and Matthew, probably had theological significance. We read of Matthew's account in which an angel appeared to the women at the empty tomb:

But the angel answered and said to the women, "Do not be afraid, for I know that you seek Jesus who was crucified. ⁶He is not here; for He is risen, as He said. Come, see the place where the Lord lay. ⁷And 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.*"

⁸So they went out quickly from the tomb with fear and great joy, and ran to bring His disciples word.

⁹And as they went to tell His disciples, behold, Jesus met them, saying, "Rejoice!" So they came and held Him by the feet and worshiped Him. ¹⁰Then Jesus said to them, "Do not be afraid. *Go and tell My brethren to go to Galilee, and there they will see Me.*"

Further in Matthew 28 we read of Jesus appearing to His disciples in Galilee:

¹⁶*Then the eleven disciples went away into Galilee*, to the mountain which Jesus had appointed for them. ¹⁷When they saw Him, they worshiped Him; but some doubted.

¹⁸And Jesus came and spoke to them, saying, "All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. ¹⁹*Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations*, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age." Amen. (Matt. 28:16-20)

It may be concluded that in Matthew and Mark's accounts that it was from Galilee that the disciples would embark on their world-wide mission to the nations of the world. Galilee was known as "Galilee of the Gentiles" (Matt. 4:15). It was viewed as the gateway to the Gentile world. There were several major trade routes that entered Galilee from the north and from the western coast. It was from there that Jesus commissioned His apostles to go forth and make disciples of the Gentile nations.

Now it is true that in Matthew and Mark Jesus gave the great commission to His disciples in Galilee, but in the Gospel of Luke and the book of Acts, and John's Gospel, I would say, the beginning and expansion of the kingdom begins first in Jerusalem. We read of this in Acts 1:8 in which Jesus told His disciples, "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth." We would say this is a fulfillment of what the prophets declared of the promised messianic (spiritual) kingdom. Here is **Micah 4:1-5**:

It shall come to pass in the latter days that the mountain of the house of the LORD shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and it shall be lifted up above the hills; and peoples shall flow to it, ²and many nations shall come, and say: "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob, that He may teach us His ways and that we may walk in His paths." **For**

³ It was also called Lake Gennesaret (Luke 5:1).

out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem. ³He shall judge between *many peoples*, and shall decide for *strong nations* far away; and they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore; ⁴but they shall sit every man under his vine and under his fig tree, and no one shall make them afraid, for the mouth of the LORD of hosts has spoken. ⁵For all the peoples walk each in the name of its god, but we will walk in the name of the LORD our God forever and ever. (Mic. 4:1-5).⁴

In John's Gospel in which Jesus appeared to His apostles in Jerusalem and in Galilee, John ties together both places from which our Lord called and sent forth His disciples into the world. During the early days of this Christian era the apostles first proclaimed the gospel to Jerusalem and Judea. But soon they went northward into Samaria and evangelized the people in that region. They then continued to proclaim the gospel in Galilee where the Lord had primarily ministered, they took the gospel from into the Gentile world.

John declared on this occasion that He appeared to 7 disciples. **Verse 2** reads that Jesus showed Himself to "*Simon Peter, Thomas called the Twin, Nathanael of Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two others of His disciples were together.*" Simon Peter is listed first. He was one of the "pillars" of the church, as Paul described him. When Paul was recounting to the churches of Galatia that he had received his gospel from the risen Christ Himself, he said that the apostles had added nothing to his message. In Galatians 2:6ff we read these words:

"But from those who seemed to be something—whatever they were, it makes no difference to me; God shows personal favoritism to no man—for those who seemed to be something added nothing to me. ⁷But on the contrary, when they saw that the gospel for the uncircumcised had been committed to me, as the gospel for the circumcised was to Peter ⁸(for He who worked effectively in Peter for the apostleship to the circumcised also worked effectively in me toward the Gentiles), ⁹and *when James, Cephas, and John, who seemed to be pillars*, perceived the grace that had been given to me, they gave me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship, that we should go to the Gentiles and they to the circumcised. (Gal. 2:6-9)

Thomas is listed second, after Peter. This disciple had not been present the first occasion that Jesus had appeared to His disciples and had doubted the resurrection of Christ when the other disciples had reported to him that He had risen. **Matthew Henry** (1662-1714) wrote of Thomas' prominent second placement on the list: "Thomas was one of them, and is named next to Peter, as if he now kept closer to the meetings of the apostles than ever. It is well if losses by our neglects make us more careful afterwards not to let opportunities slip."

Our NKJV identifies Thomas as "the twin", as does the ESV. But as we pointed out on an earlier occasion, Thomas was his Hebrew/Aramaic name and Didymus was his Greek name. Donald Carson wrote, "Thomas is again identified by both his Aramaic and Greek names." There is no reason that the newer translations should translate these words, as in the NKJV, "*Thomas called the Twin*", for both names mean "the twin." Just as Simon was also known as Peter, Thomas was also known as Didymus. I prefer the KJV translation here which gives both names: "There were together Simon Peter, and Thomas called Didymus..."

Third mention falls to Nathanael. Here he is listed as "*Nathanael of Cana in Galilee.*" He had not been mentioned in this Gospel since chapter 1. There we read of him,

The following day Jesus wanted to go to Galilee, and He found Philip and said to him, "Follow Me." ⁴⁴Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter. ⁴⁵Philip found *Nathanael* and

⁴ Contrary to the popular teaching of the dispensationalists that this is a physical, earthly, kingdom of Israel in a future 1,000 year millennium, we understand this to describe the spiritual state and blessed condition of those who are Christians, who are citizens of the kingdom of God, which is the promised messianic kingdom of the Old Testament prophets.

said to him, “We have found Him of whom Moses in the law, and also the prophets, wrote—Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph.”

⁴⁶And *Nathanael* said to him, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?”

Philip said to him, “Come and see.”

⁴⁷Jesus saw *Nathanael* coming toward Him, and said of him, “Behold, an Israelite indeed, in whom is no deceit!”

⁴⁸*Nathanael* said to Him, “How do You know me?”

Jesus answered and said to him, “Before Philip called you, when you were under the fig tree, I saw you.”

⁴⁹*Nathanael* answered and said to Him, “Rabbi, You are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!”

⁵⁰Jesus answered and said to him, “Because I said to you, ‘I saw you under the fig tree,’ do you believe? You will see greater things than these.” ⁵¹And He said to him, “Most assuredly, I say to you, hereafter you shall see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man.”

Nathanael had indeed seen greater things, and here he again sees the risen Lord Jesus and hears Him speak to His disciples.

Then John identified the “two sons of Zebedee.” According to the Synoptic Gospels, these two brothers were James and John, who was, of course, the writer of this Gospel.⁵ And then there were “two others of His disciples” among these seven disciples. These two are unnamed in this passage. These seven men “*were together*.” There is a bond between Christians, and those who have served the Lord and have walked together with Him, enjoy being together. That there were *seven* of them may be significant. As one wrote, “So seven disciples have come together, doubtless a symbolical number, representing the whole disciple group, and indeed the whole Body of disciples.”⁶ They had traveled to Galilee because that was the region where they lived. But they had also gone to Galilee because the Lord told them that He would meet with them there. But apparently they did not know exactly when and where they would meet with Jesus.

Peter spoke up to the rest, “*I am going fishing*.” This was not a sporting excursion, but rather it was a commercial venture. They were men who had families and had need to support themselves, so it was probably seen to be not only an opportune time, but also a needful occasion for them to catch fish to sell at the local markets. But in this action of Peter and the disciples that joined him we may see how men can arrive at a text and “spin” according to their own biases. **Donald Carson** cited a few examples of this:

Commentators divide as to whether Peter and his friends are to be blamed for going fishing. Hoskyns (p. 552) describes the scene as ‘one of complete apostasy’ and ‘the fulfillment of 21:32’; Barrett (p. 579) judges it ‘unthinkable’ that ‘Peter and his brother disciples should contemplate a return to their former occupation after the events of chapter 20’; Brown (2.1096) speaks of ‘aimless activity undertaken in desperation’. By contrast, Bruce (p. 399) insists there is no evidence that Peter was abandoning the commission he had received in order to return to fishing, and meanwhile ‘it was better for him to employ his time usefully than remain idle’. And Beasley-Murray (p. 399) comments, ‘Even though Jesus be crucified and risen from the dead, the disciples must still *eat!*’⁷

Then Carson gave his own opinion: “The truth is probably between the two, but a good deal closer to the latter. There is no evidence that Peter and the others had gone to Galilee in order to fish. The most reasonable assumption is that they went in obedience to the Lord’s command (Mark 14:28; 16:7 par.)”⁸

⁵ See Matt. 4:21; 10:2; Mark 1:19; 3:17; 10:35; Luke 5:10.

⁶ George R. Beasley-Murray, **John**, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 36 (Thomas Nelson, 1999), p. 399.

⁷ Donald Carson, p. 669.

⁸ *Ibid.*

II. The disciples without Jesus (vs. 4-6)

But it is clear that they had fished all night but without success. Here are **verses 4** through **6**:

⁴But when the morning had now come, Jesus stood on the shore; yet the disciples did not know that it was Jesus. ⁵Then Jesus said to them, “Children, have you any food?”

They answered Him, “No.”

⁶And 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.

It would seem that our Lord was teaching them through their experience what He had once taught them through His words, that “Without Me you can do nothing” (John 15:5). The Lord teaches us through everyday experiences that His Word and His ways are best. Here were some professional, experienced, commercial fishermen. They made their living by this occupation, but they came up empty on this occasion. Many times we take pride in our work, especially if we believe ourselves to be quite competent. But often this pride in our ability and in our production can result in a sinful independence from the Lord. We commonly rely upon our own wits and skill, thereby bringing glory to ourselves rather than the Lord. But as we grow as Christians we are to bring all matters of life under His dominion and we are to do all things in order that we give Him the glory for what we have done. **Matthew Henry** wrote of their disappointment in their fishing:

That night they caught nothing, though, it is probable, they *toiled all night*, as Luke 5:5. See the vanity of this world; the hand of the diligent often returns empty. Even good men may come short of desired success in their honest undertakings. We may be in the way of our duty, and yet not prosper. Providence so ordered it that all that night they should catch nothing, that the miraculous draught of fishes in the morning might be the more wonderful and the more acceptable. In those disappointments which to us are very grievous God has often designs that are very gracious. Man has indeed *a dominion over the fish of the sea*, but they are not always at his beck; God only knows the *paths of the sea*, and commands that which passeth through them.

The Lord would teach His disciples that all of life is to be lived in faith. Paul wrote,

“I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and *the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God*, who loved me and gave Himself for me.” (Gal. 2:20)

And so, there are times when the Lord will cause an otherwise competent and accomplished person to fail in his endeavors in order to humble him. It would seem that is what the Lord was doing with these commercial fishermen. Jesus said to them, “Children, have you any food?” They answered Him, “No.” They had caught nothing after fishing all night.

. Our Lord said to them in **verse 6**, “*Cast the net on the right side of the boat, and you will find some.*” I have recounted before how Paul Stenstrom once asked me if I had caught any fish that morning. I said, “No.” He said, “You should have fished on the right side of the boat.”

After our own failure, we tend to be more open to suggestions from others. We read that these men complied with this “stranger’s” instruction. “*So they cast, and now they were not able to draw it in because of the multitude of fish.*” Actually, it is somewhat surprising that they did as this stranger instructed them. Again, they were experienced fishermen. They knew that fish are caught in Galilee at night, not in the day time. But the day had dawned, and they had already labored all night. Nevertheless they did as He had instructed them, and they were blessed in the result. If we obey the Lord Jesus in faith, even when to do so seems to conflict with our thoughts and experience, we will soon see the glory of God and enjoy the blessings of living by faith in our Savior and Lord.

We may say a few words about the timing and the nature of the Savior revealing Himself to His disciples. First, Jesus revealed Himself after a period of time had lapsed from His last time with them, and after a period of night-long labor. Christ generally reveals Himself afresh to His people after they have been apart from one another. Through our own weakness and failure to seek Him, we can experience times in which we do not enjoy a sense of His presence with us. And then when He does manifest Himself, we are not only delighted, but we are somewhat surprised.

Christ's time of making Himself known to His people is when they are most at a loss. When they think they have lost themselves, He will let them know that they have not lost Him. Weeping may *endure for a night; but joy comes, if Christ comes, in the morning...* It is a comfort to us, when our passage is rough and stormy, that our Master is at shore, and we are hastening to him. (Matthew Henry)

Second, the Lord Jesus revealed Himself to His disciples somewhat gradually. They did not recognize Him at first, as on a few other occasions after His resurrection. The two disciples on the road to Emmaus had failed to recognize Him (Luke 24). Sometimes we only discover after the event that He had been with us all along, but that we had not recognized His presence with us in the way.

Third, Jesus revealed Himself to them in a tender manner in the way that He spoke to them. He called out, "Children, have you any food?" He called to them with an endearing word, disarming any apprehension that they otherwise might have had with Him. He called them "children." We can read Old Testament prophecy of our Lord Jesus in His exalted state singing before the Father, rejoicing and celebrating in thanksgiving to His Father for the *children* that His Father had given to Him. These Old Testament words are applied to Christ in Hebrews 2:11ff.

For both He (Christ) who sanctifies and those who are being sanctified are all of one, for which reason He is not ashamed to call them brethren, ¹²saying:

"I will declare Your name to My brethren;
In the midst of the assembly I will sing praise to You."⁹

¹³And again:

"I will put My trust in Him."

And again:

"Here am I and *the children* whom God has given Me."¹⁰

Jesus also revealed by His words his concern for their practical necessities. "Do you have any food?" He is concerned that we receive our "daily bread", and that we have clothing that is necessary for us. And if it seems that we go without for a time, we may be assured that our God will intervene and provide for us. Jesus has assured His disciples that His Father would provide these for them. He taught them,

"Therefore I say to you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink; nor about your body, what you will put on. Is not life more than food and the body more than clothing?
²⁶Look at the birds of the air, for they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns; yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? ²⁷Which of you by worrying can add one cubit to his stature?

²⁸"So why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin; ²⁹and yet I say to you that even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of

⁹ From Psalm 22:22

¹⁰ From Isaiah 8:18.

these. ³⁰Now if God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is, and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will He not much more clothe you, O you of little faith?

³¹“Therefore do not worry, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ ³²For after all these things the Gentiles seek. For your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. ³³But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you. ³⁴Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about its own things. Sufficient for the day is its own trouble. (Matt. 6:25-34)

And so, the Lord had asked His disciples, “Do you have any meat?” And they answered rather abruptly, almost rudely, saying “No.” Now Jesus knew what He was about to do. But He wanted them to own their failure and to acknowledge their need before He stepped in to supply for them. “Those that would have supplies from Christ must own themselves empty and needy” (Matthew Henry).

And then fourthly, Christ revealed Himself through the manifestation of His authority and power. He had ordered them, “Cast the net on the right side of the boat, and you will find some.” Not only had the Lord caused these fish to swim into the net, He had caused no fish to swim into their net all night long. The Lord is sovereign over all things, even the movement of the fish of the sea. All serve His purpose. This should lead us to be settled in what appears to fall out either to our advantage or to what might appear to be to our disadvantage. Our Lord has declared through His apostle, “All things are yours... And you are Christ’s, and Christ is God’s” (1 Cor. 3:21, 23). This will allow the Christian not to be greatly unsettled when things fall out resulting in his disappointment or difficulty.

His disciples complied with this man’s instruction. They had obeyed their Master, though they were unaware that they were doing so. But that they had been humbled and taught by Him in the past and had observed the manner in which He lived, they were humble and willing to comply and not to resist or resent another’s overtures. They were blessed as a result. Moses was described as the meekest man who had ever lived (to that point in history). We read, “Now the man Moses was very meek, more than all people who were on the face of the earth” (Numb. 12:3). He showed forth his exemplary spirit of meekness in humbly receiving counsel from others, including his father-in-law. Where proud men are quick to imagine insults and easily take offense, humble men will receive instruction and comply even if it may come from a stranger or if it is counter with their experience and confronts their compulsive nature to resist. Humble men will ask for directions and read instructions. I suspect that some of us can work on this. **Matthew Henry** wrote, “Note, those that are humble, diligent, and patient (though their labours may be crossed) shall be crowned; they sometimes live to see their affairs take a happy turn, after many struggles and fruitless attempts.”

We next read that...

III. The disciples recognize Jesus (vs. 7-8)

⁷Therefore 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. ⁸But 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.

John once again identifies himself somewhat anonymously. *“Therefore that disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, ‘It is the Lord!’”* It is interesting that John first recognized and announced that it was the Lord. It shows that John may have been the most spiritually alert and perceptive of the lot, or at least that he was on this occasion. But he had been the disciple closest to the Lord. Those who walk closely with the Savior in prayer and fellowship will tend to see His hand at work or His presence at hand, when others have no perception of His working or presence. And there are those among us to whom the Lord chooses to manifest Himself at special times and in comforting ways, when He withholds that light from their brethren. As John no doubt lifted the spirits of his companions and revitalized their hearts toward Jesus, so those who wonderfully perceive the presence and purposes of the Lord Jesus are a source of comfort and encouragement to the rest of us. Barnabus was “the son of consolation” and John, too, seemed to console

and encourage those about him. **John Calvin** (1509-1564) wrote in his commentary of this Gospel of John and the others:

The Evangelist shows, by his example, that it is our duty to raise our hearts to God, whenever we succeed in any thing beyond our expectation; because we ought instantly to remember that this act of kindness has flowed from the favor of Him who is the Author of every blessing. That holy recognition of the grace of God, which dwelt in the heart of John, led him also to the knowledge of Christ; for he does not perceive Christ with his eyes, but, being convinced that the great multitude of fishes has been brought to him by the hand of God, he concludes that it was Christ who had guided his hands. But, as John goes before Peter in faith, so Peter afterwards excels him in zeal, when, disregarding personal danger, he throws himself into the lake. The rest follow in the ship. True, all come to Christ at length, but Peter is actuated by a peculiar zeal in comparison of the others. Whether he crossed over to the shore by walking or by swimming, is uncertain; but let us rest satisfied with knowing that the act of leaving the ship and going on shore was not the result of folly and rashness, but that he advanced beyond the others in proportion to his zeal.

John spoke up quickly to the others, and well he should have done so. Special manifestations of the presence and power of the Lord to us are not given to us individually to be enjoyed only by us, but as with every spiritual gift that the Lord imparts to us, it is for the profit of all within the body. As Paul wrote to the church at Corinth, “But the manifestation of the Spirit is given to each one for the profit of all” (1 Cor. 12:5). And so, when John recognized Him, he announced to all, “It is the Lord.”

But whereas John may have been the most spiritual perceptive among these men, Peter was the most zealous and impulsive of the disciples. We read, “***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.***”

Later in this chapter we read of our Lord speaking with Peter alone after their meal. When Paul wrote of our Lord’s appearances he referenced a meeting of Jesus with Peter after His resurrection. **1 Corinthians 15:3-7** records his recounting our Lord’s post-resurrection appearances.

For I delivered to you first of all that which I also received: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, ⁴and that He was buried, and that He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures, ⁵and ***that He was seen by Cephas***, then by the twelve. ⁶After that He was seen by over five hundred brethren at once, of whom the greater part remain to the present, but some have fallen asleep. ⁷After that He was seen by James, then by all the apostles. ⁸Then last of all He was seen by me also, as by one born out of due time.

“Cephas” is another name for Peter. This would suggest that the Lord had appeared to Peter probably during the day sometime on the first day of His resurrection, before Jesus had shown Himself to “the Twelve.” The Lord had already restored Peter after his defection during our Lord’s trial. A man with a guilty conscience before the Lord would probably not spontaneously leap into the sea to swim to shore to be initially alone with Jesus; he would probably wait and join with Jesus in a group with the others. But here we read of an energetic and confident Peter that the Lord would welcome him and that he had no reason to be ashamed or feel estranged from the Lord, for all had been resolved and restored between them.

But the others did not follow Peter in his fashion; rather, we read in **verse 8**: “***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.***” Some had to be responsible and complete the task before them. The fish caught in the net were not to be lost through failure or neglect; they had to be hauled ashore. But the delay of the others would not be long for the boat was only about 100 yards from shore. They managed to drag their drag net with all the fish enclosed securely. It was through their diligence rather than Peter’s impulsiveness that they would all be able to sit down and enjoy fellowship together with their Lord over a meal. And so, these other men came more slowly, but in some ways they brought some benefit and substance to the gathering. Thank the Lord for those who are faithful, see to their duty, and in doing so bring benefit to others before bringing speedy

blessing for themselves. And so, the Lord gifts some with zeal and affection, even while imparting diligence and persistence to others, who achieve the completion of an important and necessary task or duty. Yes, one can become too encumbered with duty—as Martha—when she should be sitting at the feet of Jesus, as Mary (cf. Luke 10:38-42). But the work that Martha did, needed to be done by someone. We thank the Lord for both Mary’s and Martha’s within the church.

Of those that do excel, some, like John, are eminently contemplative, have great gifts of knowledge, and serve the church with them; others, like Peter, are eminently active and courageous, are strong, and do exploits, and are thus very serviceable to their generation. Some are useful as the church’s eyes, others as the church’s hands, and all for the good of the body. (Matthew Henry)

And,

What a great deal of difference there may be between some good people and others in the way of their honouring Christ, and yet both *accepted of Him*. Some serve Christ more in acts of devotion, and extraordinary expressions of a religious zeal; and they do well, *to the Lord they do it*. Peter ought not to be censured for casting himself into the sea, but commended for his zeal and the strength of his affection; and so must those be who, in love to Christ, quit the world, with Mary, to *sit at his feet*. But others serve Christ more in the affairs of the world. They continue in that ship, drag the net, and bring the fish to shore, as the other disciples here; and such ought not to be censured as worldly, for they, in their place, are as truly serving Christ as the other, even in serving tables. If all the disciples had done as Peter did, what had become of their fish and their nets? And yet if Peter had done as they did we had wanted this instance of holy zeal. Christ was well pleased with both, and so must we be. (Matthew Henry)

IV. Jesus and His disciples fellowship together, sharing a meal (vs. 9-14)

⁹Then, as soon as they had come to land, they saw a fire of coals there, and fish laid on it, and bread.

¹⁰Jesus said to them, “Bring some of the fish which you have just caught.”

¹¹Simon 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. ¹²Jesus said to them, “Come and eat breakfast.” Yet none of the disciples dared ask Him, “Who are You?”—knowing that it was the Lord.

¹³Jesus then came and took the bread and gave it to them, and likewise the fish.

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

The Lord had supper almost prepared for them, but with what they brought there would be sufficient for all. **Verses 9 and 10** read, “***Then, as soon as they had come to land, they saw a fire of coals there, and fish laid on it, and bread.***” Where did our Lord obtain these provisions? It does not say, but He could easily turn stones to bread; the devil had thought so and was no doubt right on that point (Matt. 4:3). And if Jesus could tell Peter to go cast a hook into the sea and from the “first” fish he caught he would obtain in its mouth sufficient money for the tax of both of them (Matt. 27:7), it would not be difficult for our Lord to find some fish for His fire. But what is described here is the common experience of His people. The Lord provides for His own in their time of need in His work of providence. He seems to show up at critical times and provide for us what we need, and often time, more than what we need.

Our Lord knew these men had not caught anything all night and that they would arrive hungry, so He purposed to serve them food. He knows the things that we need. But even if and when in His purpose He would have us experience great need, even prolonged need, we may rest assured that one day we will be bidden to be seated along with all the saints and Christ Himself will serve us, for we who are His disciples shall “eat and drink with Christ at His table in his kingdom” (Luke 22:30).

But our Lord told His disciples to bring to the feast some of the fish they had caught. It is a good thing when people may enjoy the product of their own labor, not having it confiscated or commandeered from

them. Moreover we are to put to use that which we have. It is said of the lazy man, the slothful man, that “Whoever is slothful will not roast his game, but the diligent man will get precious wealth” (Pro. 12:27). And our Lord would have them to enjoy what He had brought to them and what they had labored to haul to land. All that we have to enjoy comes from the hand of the Lord. That is why we are to be grateful and that is why the Christian expresses thanksgiving to Him before every meal and throughout each day. The spiritual man is a thankful man.

It is not an abuse of this passage to see the parallels between what the disciples experienced and what they would experience as they brought the gospel to the world. Early on Jesus had told the fishermen among His disciples, “Follow Me and I will make you fishers of men” (Matt. 4:19). Soul-winning work—making disciples of Jesus Christ—is much like fishing. It requires time, effort, skill and patience. As these men fished all night and caught nothing, so it is commonly with fishers of men. We are not assured that we will be successful in every venture. I recall years ago a friend telling me that he attended a missions’ conference. The speakers had been relating the great blessing the Lord had bestowed upon them in their various fields of endeavor, of the many souls that they had witnessed converted to Christ. David had been sitting by an elderly man with whom he struck conversation. He discovered he had been a missionary for many decades. David asked him about the number of souls he had been able to bring to the Lord through his endeavors. The man responded to him, “Through the years I only saw several become converted.” The man had served in an Islamic country in which he had little “success”, or so it appeared. But he had been faithful in bearing witness to that people in that land. The measure of success cannot be rightly measured by the results, but sadly unspiritual people do that commonly. The test by which we are all measured by the Lord, however, is that of faithfulness. The Lord Himself declared to the church at Pergamum,

“I know your works, and where you dwell, where Satan’s throne is. And you hold fast to My name, and did not deny My faith even in the days in which Antipas was My faithful martyr, who was killed among you, where Satan dwells... To him who overcomes I will give some of the hidden manna to eat. And I will give him a white stone, and on the stone a new name written which no one knows except him who receives it.” (Rev. 2:13, 17)

But then there may be times when He adds His blessing. Those who are faithful do as He instructed them, “Cast the (gospel) net on the right side of the boat, and you will find some.” And on occasion to the one who in faith and obedience casts the gospel net, the Lord causes a great haul of souls to be brought home. And just as these disciples brought the fish they had caught to their Master, so ministers are to bring their “catch” to their Master, for He had given them success to this end.

Jesus would have His disciples contribute to the feast. “*Jesus said to them, ‘Bring some of the fish which you have just caught’*” (v. 10). It was then that Peter jumped up and seemed to finish what the rest of them had done while dragging the fish to shore. We read in **verse 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.*” Peter must have been a powerfully built man. These were large fish, and many in number. The specific number is given, which was 153 fish. What took six other men effort to drag them toward the shore, Peter was able to do alone bringing them on the shore.

Now where some might be tempted to find some kind of hidden spiritual meaning in this number of 153, but their assertions would probably be fallacious. But that has not prevented many through history making claims of what they thought God was conveying through this number. Here are a few attempts of explanation cited by Donald Carson:

Throughout the history of the church, the most popular solution is that advanced by Jerome (AD 340s-420), 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 all human beings without distinction (12:32). 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...

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. Emerton has noted 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. $1+2+3+\dots+17=153$...). Thus any 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).¹¹

Carson went on to relate a number of other popular proposals. He concluded by writing, "If the Evangelist has some symbolism in mind connected with the number 153, he has hidden it well." These kinds of silly proposals greatly populate the internet. I would encourage you to stay far from internet exegesis.

John Calvin, being the studious but cautious interpreter of the Scripture, wrote on the statement of John, "And now they were not able to draw it." In doing so he also addressed the minor points of the account advising to avoid supplying some meaning to them:

Christ here exhibited two proofs of his Divine power. The first consisted in their taking so large a draught of fishes; and the second was, when, by his concealed power, He preserved the *net* whole, which otherwise must unavoidably have been broken in pieces. Other circumstances are mentioned, namely, that the disciples find burning coals on the shore, that fishes are laid on them, and that bread is also prepared. As to the number of *the fishes*, we ought not to look for any deep mystery in it. Augustine enters into ingenious reasonings about the statement of the number, and says that it denotes the Law and the Gospel; but if we examine the matter carefully, we shall find that this is childish trifling.

The point is that there were many fish, and they were large in size, and the net did not break. The Lord assured that the fish would be caught in the net and He assured that all of them would be successfully brought to shore.

John concluded this episode with the invitation of His disciples to dine with Him. We read in verses 12 and 13,

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. ¹³Jesus then came and took the bread and gave it to them, and likewise the fish.

"The LORD bless you and keep you;
The LORD make His face shine upon you,
And be gracious to you;
The LORD lift up His countenance upon you,
And give you peace." (Numb. 6:24-26)

¹¹ Carson, pp. 672f.