



Title: The Fish Breakfast

Text: John 21:1-14

Date: April 24, 2022

Main Idea: Jesus, as breakfast host, reveals he is still friend and Lord to Simon Peter.

Personal Study Guide

READ ENTIRE TEXT: JOHN 21:1-14

Highlight – What stands out?

1. What do you notice about the setting and events of the breakfast that seem familiar?
2. What terms or ideas do you see here that you've heard before in John?
3. Is there anything surprising to you in this text?
4. Who are the characters in this passage? What did they say and what did they do?

Explain – What does this mean?

*There are four parts to the Gospel of John:

- Prologue: John 1
- The Book of Signs: John 2-11
- The Book of Glory: John 12-20
- Epilogue: John 21

We have now come to the Epilogue, where many of the themes that came up throughout the Gospel come together for one final purpose.

1. Read John 1: 35-42, Matthew 4:18-22, Mark 1:16- 20, and Luke 5:1-11. Compare and contrast these verses with what Jesus is doing with Peter in John 21:1-14.
2. What is the significance of John including this account, especially given what you know about Peter and his response to Jesus in John 18?
3. Look at verses 9-14. What do these verses tell you about Jesus' heart and character? What kind of Savior is he in these verses?
4. What is the purpose statement of John? (Hint: It's in John 20:31). How does this fulfill that purpose statement?

St. Helen's Commentary says this about this scene:

"This open-ended finish to the Gospel shows that Jesus' concern, in the post-resurrection era, will be with the feeding of His people through what He has fed His apostles. It is a summary statement of much of the Gospel and a final authentication that the apostles' witness is genuine."

Apply – How does this change me?

1. Simon Peter decides to "go fishing" and six of the disciples "follow him" but they catch nothing. Are there areas in your life that are fruitless and need to be turned over to Jesus?
2. After they follow Jesus' command, the disciples haul in "153 large fish". Where in your life and ministry have you seen God's blessings?

3. How have you been “fed” by Jesus in your life and how has that transformed your ability to minister to others?

Respond – What’s my next step?

**As a Christian and a Group Leader, you have the opportunity to lead others in more personal connections to Jesus and to God’s word. Here are a few ideas for how to do for this week:*

- Consider bringing breakfast on the Sunday that you teach this lesson or have a potluck breakfast and ask class members to bring breakfast items to share. Ask members to share one way they have known Jesus as friend recently as you eat together.
- Spend some time thinking about Group members who are struggling or who may have missed a few Sundays. Invite them to a meal this week to check-in on them.
- As you eat breakfast this week, take time to pray for each of your class members by name, for more nearness and growth in their relationship with God through Jesus and His Holy Spirit.
- Invite someone to breakfast this week who is not a Christian. Say a blessing before you eat and pray for the person by name.

Commentary

V. EPILOGUE (21:1–25)

A. JESUS APPEARS TO HIS DISCIPLES BY THE SEA (21:1–14)

21:1. *Afterwards (meta tauta, as in 3:22)* establishes sequence but no chronological details. The disciples have left Jerusalem and returned to Galilee, probably not with the main groups of journeying pilgrims but in small groups of two or three, several days after the week-long Feast of Unleavened Bread.

There Jesus *appeared* (*ephanerōsen heauton*, lit. 'he revealed himself') *again to his disciples*, this time by the *Sea of Tiberias*—an alternative name for Lake Galilee, one found in the New Testament only in John (*cf.* notes on 6:1). Such 'revelation' or 'manifestation' is a common theme of the Fourth Gospel, but more commonly in reference to Jesus' manifestation in the days of his flesh: e.g. John the Baptist came that Jesus might *be revealed* to Israel (1:31); in the first sign, Jesus *revealed* his glory (2:11), and throughout his ministry, climaxing in the cross/exaltation, Jesus *revealed* his Father's name (17:6). Here, in resurrection body, he reveals himself. The implication of the wording seems to be that this resurrection appearance (undertaken, like all the others in the Fourth Gospel, at Jesus' initiative) is itself a revelatory act.

21:2. Of the seven disciples, Simon Peter (the double name is especially common in John) appears first, probably because he was the unofficial leader, as suggested even by his initiative in the next verse. Thomas is again identified by both his Aramaic and Greek names (*cf.* 11:16; 20:24). Nathanael has not been mentioned since 1:45–51, and only here is he said to come from Cana, the site of Jesus' first two signs in this Gospel (2:1–11; 4:46–54). The sons of Zebedee have not been identified as such before in John. The silence is remarkable, since the Synoptics portray Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, James and John, as a kind of triumvirate within the Twelve. That silence has contributed to the view that the beloved disciple (*cf.* v. 20) is none other than John. (It could not have been James, since James was martyred so early he could not have been responsible for the composition of this Gospel.) The mention of two more disciples, unnamed, makes this identification less than certain, though Haenchen overstates the matter when he insists that the unnamed pair 'make it impossible for us to determine [the beloved disciple's] name' (2. 229). This assessment would be fair if it were the only access we have to the identification of the beloved disciple. In reality, there are both internal and external reasons for making the identification (*cf.* Introduction, § IV), so such piecemeal assessment appears unjustified.

It might be tempting to suppose that these *seven* disciples represent, through the symbolism of the number, all of Jesus' followers. But since John does not habitually utilize this number, nor even in this instance mention the number—the reader must do the addition—we cannot be certain.

21:3. 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 16:32'; Barrett (p. 579) judges it 'unthinkable' that 'Peter and his brother disciples should contemplate a return to their former occupation after the events of ch. 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!*'

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 (Mk. 14:28; 16:7 par.). Moreover by this time Peter himself had seen the risen Lord (Lk. 24:34; 1 Cor. 15:5), a point confirmed by the fact that Peter so quickly threw himself into the water and swam for shore as soon as the identity of the man of the shore was pointed out. This does not read like the action of someone who is running away.

But if Peter and his friends have neither apostasized nor sunk into despair, this fishing expedition and the dialogue that ensues do not read like the lives of men on a Spirit-empowered mission. It is impossible to imagine any of this taking place in Acts, *after Pentecost*. There is a certain eagerness for the risen Jesus, still strangely halting as the reality of Jesus' resurrection is still sinking in. But most emphatically this is not the portrait of believers who have received the promised Paraclete. There is neither the joy nor the assurance, not to mention the sense of mission and the spirit of unity, that characterize the church when freshly endowed with the promised Spirit. It is this 'tone' in the chapter that confirms the exegesis of 20:22, given above, and authenticates the chapter as part of the original Gospel.

Although there is evidence that the night time was considered best for fishing on Galilee, one wonders if the Evangelist is not still employing one of his favourite symbols (*cf.* notes on 3:2, 19–21; 13:30; 20:1). They are coming to grips with the resurrection, but they still have not learned the profound truth that apart from Christ they can do nothing (15:5), and so *that night they caught nothing* (*cf.* Lk. 5:5).

21:4. Whether this is an instance when disciples are kept from recognizing the resurrected Christ (Lk. 24:16; *cf.* notes on 20:14, 15) is unclear. It may have been so *early in the morning* that it was impossible in the dimness to identify the figure on the shore.

21:5–6. 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' (*prosphagion*) 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 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?'

Although *the right side* of anything was widely considered in Greek circles to be a sign of good luck, it would be utterly trivial to think that this is why Jesus gave his command *Throw your net on the right side of the boat and you will find some*, or why the disciples heeded it. Why he gave the command is straightforward: he knew there was a great school of fish on the starboard side, as he had known it on another occasion (Lk. 5:1–11). What is at first more difficult

is why these fishermen should pay any attention. If they had already recognized the Master, their obedience would make sense, but not v. 7, where recognition comes only after the catch; if they have not recognized him, why listen to the voice of someone calling in early dawn gloom from the shore of the lake? Indeed, Brown (2. 1090–1091) asks how Peter could go through the same situation and much of the same dialogue as on the earlier occasion, without recognizing Jesus. This difficulty is judged to be primary evidence of ‘secondary’ features in the story, prompting many to conclude that this is a variant account of the episode described in Luke 5:1–11.

But as Marshall points out, the amount of ‘common dialogue’ is greatly over-estimated. It amounts to no more than the command to let down their nets. If the disciples are not *expecting* Jesus to appear, and do not recognize the man on the shore, it is hard to see how Jesus’ exhortation to throw the net on the starboard side greatly differs from advice contemporary sports fishermen have to endure (and occasionally appreciate): ‘Try casting over there. You often catch them over there!’ (If there are some contemporary sports fishermen who have not yet experienced this delight, I recommend they take my children with them on their next trip.)

Whether in hope or in tired resignation, the men in the boat heed the advice. Immediately they are *unable to haul the net because of the large number of fish*—a rather different result from the episode of Luke 5:1–11, where two boats are so filled with fish that they are in danger of sinking.

21:7. Characteristically, the beloved disciple exhibits quick insight, and Peter quick action. No sooner has the former exclaimed, *It is the Lord!*, than Peter has *wrapped his outer garment around him ... and jumped into the water*. The general picture is clear; the details are not. 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).

21:8. We are to understand that Peter impetuously swims ashore and leaves his companions struggling to manoeuvre the boat to shore, *towing the net full of fish*. The distance was about two hundred cubits; a *pēchys* (‘cubit’) was usually about eighteen inches, hence NIV’s *about a hundred yards*. The fact that the narrator’s perspective stays with the boat, instead of diverting to the encounter between Jesus and Peter, is a small indication of eyewitness integrity.

21:9–10. When those in the boat landed, *they saw a fire of burning coals (anthrakia; cf. notes on 18:18) with fish on it, and some bread.* In the days of his flesh, Jesus washes his disciples' feet (13:1–17). Now, as their risen Lord, he serves them still (*cf. also v. 13*): he meets their tiredness after a night of toil with a hot breakfast. They can begin to eat what he has cooked while some of the fish they have just caught are prepared. The word for 'fish' in vv. 9, 10 is *opsarion* (*cf. notes on 6:9, 11*), singular in v. 9 (was there just one large fish being cooked?) and plural in v. 10—though the singular form can be collective, as probably in v. 13). For further comments on this word, *cf. Introduction, § IV; NewDocs 2. § 64*).

21:11. The story again links up with Peter. That he could climb aboard and haul the net ashore himself suggests that he was a physically strong man.

Large quantities of ink have gone into explaining why there should be 153 fish. At the purely historical level, it is unsurprising that someone counted them, either as part of dividing them up amongst the fishermen in preparation for sale, or because one of the men was so dumbfounded by the size of the catch that he said something like this: 'Can you believe it? I wonder how many there are?'

But such pedestrian considerations have not satisfied those who are certain there is profound significance in the number. 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). 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. Emerton 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.

That 153 is the triangular number of 17 did not escape the church Fathers. Augustine 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. 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', or of Pisgah (thus making an allusion to the death of Moses, Dt. 34:1), or of the Hebrew for 'Cana G' (representing 'Cana in Galilee', and thereby tying this miracle to the first two).¹⁷

Many other suggestions have been put forward, none very convincing. Whatever internal difficulty each might have, as a group most of them do not relate to this passage very well. They tend to offer, at best, an allusion to an admittedly Johannine theme, but nothing that flows naturally out of John 21:11. If the Evangelist has some symbolism in mind connected with the number 153, he has hidden it well.

Even so, there may be symbolism in the sheer quantity, if not the number itself, since the Evangelist draws attention to it: *but even with so many the net was not torn*. It is hard not to see an allusion to Luke 5:1–11, where the nets were torn. This may suggest that the gospel net will never break, that there is no limit to the number of converts it catches (Bruce, pp. 401–402). If such symbolism is operating, it may owe something to Jesus himself, who elsewhere promised to make his disciples 'fishers of men' (Mk. 1:17).

21:12–13. It was almost as if the disciples were reluctant to come, even as they were eager to be with him. Jesus must spell out the invitation: *Come and have breakfast (aristēsate, here used, as classically, for the first meal of the day, as v. 4 requires; more commonly in the New Testament for a later meal—e.g. Lk. 11:37–38; 14:12)*.

The second half of the verse is finely balanced, a balance that must be respected if the mood of the text is to be preserved. One might ask why, if the disciples 'knew it was the Lord', they would *want* to ask him, 'Who are you?' But the Evangelist does not merely say they *did* not ask him, he says they *dared* not ask him (lit.) 'knowing it was the Lord'. This is not the same reticence as that exhibited by the two disciples on the road to Emmaus who were kept from

recognizing him (Lk. 24:16): these disciples *know* it is the Lord, and yet are still so uneasy, so hesitant, so uncertain, that they apparently long to ask him, in effect, 'Is it *really* you?', yet *dare* not do so.

Perhaps it is the lack of imaginative historical reconstruction on our part that makes us hesitate to see the compelling power of this interpretation. Our creeds make the resurrection of Jesus Christ so central that it requires considerable mental effort to put ourselves in the places of the first disciples. The evidence of ch. 20 is here presupposed. The disciples had been granted the strongest possible reasons for believing in Jesus' resurrection, and indeed did so: *they knew it was the Lord*. But whether because they could see Jesus was not simply resuscitated (like Lazarus), but appeared with new powers, or because they were still grappling with the strangeness of a crucified and resurrected Messiah, or because despite the irrefutable power of the evidence presented to them resurrection itself seemed strange, they felt considerable unease—yet suppressed their question because they knew the one before them could only be Jesus.

Thus, when *Jesus came, took the bread and gave it to them, and did the same with the fish* (v. 13), he was not primarily offering evidence of his own physical resurrection. Unlike Luke 24:41–43, there is no mention of his own eating—eating which had earlier been done less to sustain him than to establish the faith of his disciples. Here, however, he reassures them, meets their physical needs, serves them as he did before his passion. It is a time for them to adjust to the new eschatological situation; it is a time sufficiently symbol-laden, in a culture where symbols were more highly regarded than in our own, to speak to them powerfully, as they meditated upon it, about the Lord's continued presence and power with them as they prosecuted the mission with which he charged them.

Despite the fact that some Christian art in the first few centuries of the church depicts fish along with bread in representations of the eucharist, and despite the fact that some commentators make similar connections, the allusions are at best remote. One's assessment is necessarily based in part on one's prior reading of John 6. Even so, there is no hint that Jesus here gives *himself* in the bread and fish, or that in their eating they are even symbolically, let alone sacramentally, partaking of him.

21:14. 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). The expression *he was raised* (passive of *egeirō*) is one of two verbs commonly used to refer to the resurrection itself, the other

being *anistēmi* (used in 20:9). There does not appear to be a great distinction in meaning.

The reference to the *third time* Jesus appeared probably enumerates only the appearances reported in this Gospel (20:19–23; 20:26–29). The appearance to Mary Magdalene is not counted, since that was not an appearance *to his disciples*. It is extremely difficult to place all the appearances reported in the New Testament into chronological order. At least three sequences are possible.