

# The Resurrection and Post-Resurrection Narratives

## Chapter 11: The Appearance to Seven Disciples by the Sea of Galilee

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After these things Jesus shewed himself again to the disciples at the sea of Tiberias; and on this wise shewed he himself. There were together Simon Peter, and Thomas called Didymus, and Nathanael of Cana in Galilee, and the sons of Zebedee, and two other of his disciples. Simon Peter saith unto them, "I go a fishing." They say unto him, "We also go with thee." They went forth, and entered into a ship immediately; and that night they caught nothing. But when the morning was now come, Jesus stood on the shore: but the disciples knew not that it was Jesus. Then Jesus saith unto them, "Children, have ye any meat?" They answered him, "No." And he said unto them, "Cast the net on the right side of the ship, and ye shall find." They cast therefore, and now they were not able to draw it for the multitude of fishes. Therefore that disciple whom Jesus loved saith unto Peter, "It is the Lord." Now when Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he girt his fisher's coat unto him, (for he was naked,) and did cast himself into the sea. And the other disciples came in a little ship; (for they were not far from land, but as it were two hundred cubits,) dragging the net with fishes. As soon then as they were come to land, they saw a fire of coals there, and fish laid thereon, and bread. Jesus saith unto them, "Bring of the fish which ye have now caught." Simon Peter went up, and drew the net to land full of great fishes, an hundred and fifty and three: and for all there were so many, yet was not the net broken. Jesus saith unto them, "Come and dine." And none of the disciples durst ask him, "Who art thou?" knowing that it was the Lord. Jesus then cometh, and taketh bread, and giveth them, and fish likewise. This is now the third time that Jesus shewed himself to his disciples, after that he was risen from the dead. So when they had dined, Jesus saith to Simon Peter, "Simon, son of Jonas, lovest thou me more than these?" He saith unto him, "Yea, Lord; thou knowest that I love thee." He saith unto him, "Feed my lambs." He saith to him again the second time, "Simon, son of Jonas, lovest thou me?" He saith unto him, "Yea, Lord; thou knowest that I love thee." He saith unto him, "Feed my sheep." He saith unto him the third time, "Simon, son of Jonas, lovest thou me?" Peter was grieved because he said unto him the third time, "Lovest thou me?" And he said unto him, "Lord, thou knowest all things; thou knowest that I love thee." Jesus saith unto him, "Feed my sheep. Verily, verily, I say unto thee, When thou wast young, thou girdest thyself, and walkedst whither thou wouldest: but when thou shalt be old, thou shalt stretch forth thy hands, and another shall gird thee, and carry thee whither thou wouldest not." This spake he, signifying by what death he should glorify God. And when he had spoken this, he saith unto him, "Follow me." Then Peter, turning about, seeth the disciple whom Jesus loved following; which also leaned on his breast at supper, and said, "Lord, which is he that betrayeth thee?" Peter seeing him saith to Jesus, "Lord, and what shall this man do?" Jesus saith unto him, "If I will that he tarry till I come, what is that to thee? Follow thou me." Then went this saying abroad among the brethren, that that disciple should not die: yet Jesus said not unto him, "He shall not die; but, If I will that he tarry till I come, what is that to thee?" This is the disciple which testifieth of these things, and wrote these things: and we know that his testimony is true. And there are also many other things which Jesus did, the which, if they should be written every one, I suppose that even the world itself could not contain the books that should be written. Amen (John 21:1-25).

The final appearance of Jesus to the apostles in the gospel of John is quite different from the previous appearances and contains much rich and interesting gospel history. The previous appearances were all on the Lord's day or the first day of the week while this appearance occurred on a regular work day. The other appearances took place when the apostles were meeting behind closed doors with virtually all the disciples present. These first manifestations occurred in Jerusalem where the disciples were in fear for their lives. But, in this narrative, the scene has shifted to Galilee (sometimes called the Sea of Tiberias or the Lake of Gennesaret) where the apostles are not afraid and can move about openly. At this appearance only seven apostles are present. This incident is only mentioned by John and is the only description of the apostles' activities after leaving Jerusalem, while they were in Galilee waiting for the great commission and the ascension. The amazing events and interaction between Christ and these apostles on this occasion are designed to prepare the apostles for the great commission and their future ministry.

This chapter can be divided into five main sections. (1) There is the appearance of Jesus to the apostles who are fishing on Galilee. Our Lord's instructions to the disciples lead to a miraculous catch of fish. (2) When the apostles come to shore the Savior serves them a prepared meal (21:1-14). (3) Then follows the conversation between Jesus and Peter where our Lord graciously and tenderly reinstates Peter (21:15-17). (4) Peter's reinstatement is immediately followed by a prophecy of Peter's martyrdom (21:18-19) and a somewhat vague comment about the beloved disciple's future (21:20-23). This section provides John with the opportunity to correct a misconception in the churches at that time that John would never die (21:23). (5) The chapter ends with the final conclusion of the whole gospel. Because there are a wide variety of views among scholars regarding John 21, some preliminary comments need to be made before we examine the particulars of each section.

## Preliminary Comments

The last chapter of John's gospel has been the occasion of a number of different theories by scholars. The reason for disagreements and speculations arises from the fact that the last two verses of chapter 20 appear to be the conclusion of the gospel. Chapter 20, in its form, structure and purpose, serves as a perfect climax of the resurrection narratives. Further, chapter 21 reads as though it were an add-on or epilogue to the gospel. Therefore, in our day, the majority of New Testament scholars regard chapter 21 as an appendix, a postscript, an addendum or an epilogue to the gospel.

Of the scholars who believe that chapter 21 was an addition to an already completed work, some believe that the final chapter was not even written by John but was added many years later by an editor of the Johannine school. Others believe that John himself dictated the final chapter in his old age to eliminate a rumor that had spread in the churches that he would not die before the Lord returned (cf. Jn. 21:20-23). Still others believe that a leader in the church at Ephesus wrote the final chapter under divine inspiration with the apostle John's permission (e.g., William Hendriksen). This view is based on the use of "we" in verse 24 and the lengthy description of John in 21:20.

Although from a stylistic standpoint there is nothing wrong with viewing chapter 21 as an epilogue (an epilogue simply refers to the concluding section of a book that serves to complete the plan of the work), any idea that the last chapter was added on later or was not written by John himself should be repudiated for the following reasons. First, of all the thousands of ancient and

medieval texts of the fourth gospel there is not one in which the 21<sup>st</sup> chapter is omitted. If the gospel was written and released and then added to later, there is no doubt whatsoever but that some texts without chapter 21 would remain. Therefore, if the final chapter was a later addition it would mean that John wrote the gospel and then waited several years before releasing it. Such a scenario is exceedingly unlikely. Further, there “is not the slightest proof that any trustworthy ancient writer ever regarded the last chapter of St. John’s Gospel, as less genuine and less inspired than the rest of the book.”<sup>1</sup>

Second, the view that John 20:30-31 was written as the conclusion of the whole gospel without any consideration for chapter 21 is pure speculation. It makes perfect sense to consider the beloved disciple’s statement in 20:30-31 as given to emphasize the need to believe in and confess Jesus in the same manner as Thomas, even though his history was not yet complete. It is unwise to *guess* regarding John’s intent or *impose* modern literary methods on a unique inspired history. There is nothing unnatural or out of harmony with the gospel in chapter 21 that merits the assertion that it was added long after the gospel was originally penned.

Third, the vocabulary, grammar and style of chapter 21 clearly points to an identity of authorship with the rest of the gospel. Although minor divergences exist, there are “remarkable agreements in style between cc. 1-20 and c. 21. The use of *amen amen* at v. 18; the evangelistic comment at v. 23, are among the more obvious. Such similarities might possibly be due to conscious imitation of the mannerisms of Jn. by the author of the Appendix, but there are others, more subtle, which can hardly be thus explained.”<sup>2</sup>

Fourth, the idea that chapter 21 is a later addition “is altogether unworthy of the apostolical character, and inconsistent with the tenor of this Gospel; and it altogether fails to give any reason why the Apostle did not strike out the conclusion in ch. xx. 30, 31, after the addition of the postscript had rendered it unsuitable.”<sup>3</sup> If John or anyone else added chapter 21 onto an already completed gospel, then why did they not simply move 20:30-31 to the end of chapter twenty-one? The alleged awkwardness of chapter twenty-one, if anything, is evidence of its being written by John as part of the original gospel.

## The Miraculous Draught of Fishes

John’s narrative begins some time after the second appearance to the apostles (Note the indefinite expression “after these things” in verse one). By this time the disciples, in obedience to Jesus’ command (Mk. 16:7; Mt. 18:7, 16) had made their way back to Galilee.

The sea of Tiberias (Jn. 6:1; 21:1) also called “the sea” (Mt. 8:24, 32; Mk. 2:13; Jn. 6:16, 17); the “lake of Gennesaret” (Lk. 5:1); the “sea of Chinnereth” (Nu. 34:11; Josh. 13:27) or “Chinnereth” (Josh. 19:35) and the “Sea of Galilee” (Mt. 4:18; 15:29; Mk. 1:16; 7:31) was next to the original home of at least eight of the apostles: Philip (Jn. 1:44), John (Mt. 4:21; Mk. 1:19), Andrew (Jn. 1:44; Mk. 1:16-18; Mt. 4:18-20); Peter (Lk. 5:3ff.; Jn. 1:44), James (Mk. 1:19; Mt. 4:21; Lk. 5:10), Matthew (Mk. 2:1, 14-15), Nathanel (Jn. 21:2) and James the son of Alphaeus (Mk. 2:14; 3:18-19; Mt. 10:3-4; James the son of Alphaeus was Matthew’s brother). This

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<sup>1</sup> J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels: John*, 3:480.

<sup>2</sup> J. H. Bernard, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to St. John*, 2:687. Bernard continues by noting some of the subtle mannerisms of John: “*apo* in v. 8 is used exactly as at 11:18; *omoios* in v. 13 just as at 6:11; *sun* (v. 3) is rare in Jn., but it is found [in] 12:2, 18:1; *mentoi* (v. 4) is thoroughly Johannine (cf. 12:42); and so is *os oun* (v. 9; see on 4:40)” (Ibid.).

<sup>3</sup>E. W. Hengstenberg, *Commentary on the Gospel of St. John*, 2:466.

beautiful fresh water lake sustained a prosperous fishing business in the days of our Lord. The lake contained over twenty-two different species of fish with the most numerous being the Tilapia. “The best fishing was at the N end of the lake where the Jordan enters.”<sup>4</sup> The north end of the lake was the old fishing area of Peter, Andrew, John and James who were partners and co-owners of a fishing business when called by Jesus (Mt. 4:18-22; Mk. 1:16-20; Lk. 5:1-11).

The lake’s geography is unique in that it lies 685 feet below sea level. “Looking down upon the Sea of Galilee from the height of Safed the lake looks harp shaped (the meaning of the Heb. term from which the word ‘chinnereth’ is derived) with a bulge to the NW, and is deep blue. It is truly a beautiful sight.... From the entrance of the Jordan at the N to the southern tip of the lake is...about thirteen miles.... The width of the N of the lake at its greatest distance...is usually understood to be seven and a half miles.... Opinions concerning the sea’s depth fluctuate from eighty ft. in the more shallow areas to the maximum of 160ft.”<sup>5</sup>

There are a number of things that are noteworthy regarding this section of Scripture. First, only seven of the apostles are present. Two are not named. One of the two may have been Peter’s brother Andrew who was a fisherman with Peter before their calling. The other perhaps was Philip who was an inhabitant of Bethsaida on the lake. The account does not say why only seven went fishing. Not all of the eleven were fishermen and some may not have even known how to swim. The number seven in Scripture is often associated with perfection. John may have mentioned the number because this scene completed the beloved disciple’s resurrection narrative.

The manner in which the apostles are listed is particularly interesting. Peter is named first, which is not unusual. He is listed first in each of the four places where the New Testament lists the apostles (Mt. 10:2-4; Mk. 3:16-19; Lk. 6:14-16; Ac. 1:13). But Thomas who is listed either eighth (Mk. 3:18; Lk. 6:14) or seventh (Mt. 10:3) in the synoptic gospels is now listed second, right after Peter. This not only links this chapter with the immediately preceding narrative, but also shows that Thomas, now thoroughly convinced, has taken great care to cling to the apostles. Also, Peter and Thomas had been the most bold and public deniers of the truth of all the disciples during the apostles’ time of failure. From this we learn that the Christian church “is made up of those who were doubters, deniers, and sinners of many varieties, but who have been brought to faith in Christ and have had their sins forgiven.”<sup>6</sup> The apostles were saved and chosen by Jesus not because they were intrinsically great or noble, but because of the Savior’s grace and mercy toward them.

We must never forget the humble working class origins of the apostles. These men were not men of riches, notability, great education or exceptional intelligence. Most worked hard with their hands to make a living. The fact that we find them toiling all night in order to have food to eat demonstrates that the church at this time was too small, scattered and obscure to support eleven men. The very humble beginnings of the church and the fact that the apostles were such ordinary men are excellent proof of the divine origin of Christianity. The same men who were up all night attempting to catch fish to eat and support themselves would soon turn the whole world upside down. These men would be used by God to establish churches throughout the Roman Empire and beyond. If it had not been for their calling by Christ and their enabling by the Holy Spirit, they would have all died in obscurity in a small corner of a tiny oppressed nation. But, in

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<sup>4</sup> R. H. Alexander, “Sea of Galilee” in Merrill C. Terry gen ed., *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975, 76), 2:646.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, 5:643-644.

<sup>6</sup> James Montgomery Boice, *The Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985, 99), 5:1625.

obedience to the Master, they became the twelve foundations of the New Jerusalem, the holy bride, the church (Rev. 21:14). These unlearned, ignorant men would be so gifted by the Holy Spirit that, when they confronted the rank paganism of their day and the sophisticated ancient philosophies by preaching the cross, they did so boldly, without fear and with amazing success. “These were the men who at Ephesus, and Athens, and Rome, emptied the heathen temples of their worshippers, and turned away multitudes to a new and better faith.... Nothing can account for the rise and progress of Christianity but the direct interposition of God.”<sup>7</sup>

Second, Peter said to the others that he was going fishing and they volunteered to go along. This act of fishing by these disciples has been unjustly criticized by many commentators. This fishing expedition has been labeled “an act of self will” (*The New Scofield Reference Bible*; Arthur W. Pink), an act of “uncertainty” (Leon Morris) and “serving in the energy of the flesh” (Arthur W. Pink). A much better explanation is that the apostles who could return to lawful employment while they waited for instructions from Christ and the coming of the Holy Spirit, did so. Peter probably still owned a fishing boat and decided to go fishing. There is nothing in the text to suggest that the disciples were abandoning their mission or were being disobedient to their Master. They needed to sustain themselves while they waited for events to unfold. “The great business of going out as our Lord’s messengers, to preach the Gospel, was not to begin until his ascension, and in the interval it was better to follow an honest calling than to be idle.”<sup>8</sup> Even the great apostle Paul worked as a tentmaker to help support himself on his missionary journeys (cf. Ac. 18:3).

The seven went fishing at night which was the best time for a good catch (see. Lk. 5:5). These men toiled all night without catching a single fish. Fishing is a very uncertain enterprise with results that can be very poor or excellent. This night, however, was an exceptional failure. The apostles, who were soon to be fishers of men, this particular night “caught nothing.” This failure is very important, for Jesus makes His appearance in order to turn their complete failure into an amazing success. “God permitted them to toil to no purpose during the whole *night*, in order to prove the truth of the miracle; for if they had *caught any thing*, what followed immediately afterwards would not have so clearly manifested the power of Christ, but when, after having toiled ineffectually during the whole night, they were suddenly favoured with a large take of fishes, they have good reason for acknowledging the goodness of the Lord.”<sup>9</sup>

Third, the narrative of the miraculous draught of fishes is designed to show the apostles that their kingdom work of fishing for men must soon be resumed with vigor and that they are completely dependent upon Christ for success in their ministries.

After the disciples fished all night with no success, Jesus stood on the shore, yet was not recognized by the disciples (21:4). This non-recognition was likely due to the early morning light, the distance of the boat from the shore (in verse 8 we are told that the boat was about two hundred cubits off shore which is around one hundred yards); and, the simple fact that the apostles were not expecting the Savior to appear at such a time. (The two previous visitations were on the Christian Sabbath). We must also keep in mind that with His glorified body the Redeemer looked the same, yet not *exactly* the same.

Given the distance to the boat, Jesus with a loud voice asked the disciples a friendly question to put them at ease: “Children, do you have any food?” (Jn. 21:5). The word translated “meat” (KJV) or “food” (NKJV) (Greek, *prosphagion*) can refer to anything to eat, but is

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<sup>7</sup> J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels: John*, 3:476.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid*, 3:484.

<sup>9</sup> John Calvin, *Commentary on the Gospel According to St. John*, 2:284.

sometimes used for any food which is eaten with bread.<sup>10</sup> In this context, the Savior is politely asking the disciples if they have caught any fish. Interestingly, our Lord often began conversations with courteous questions. With the woman at the well, He began witnessing to her by saying, “Give Me a drink” (Jn. 4:7). With Mary Magdalene He asked, “Why are you weeping? Whom are you seeking” (Jn. 20:15)? The word translated, “children” (Greek, *paidia*) is a friendly colloquial expression like, “young fellows.” If Jesus had used the more intimate term, “little children” (Greek. *teknia*), which He used in John 13:33, He would have at once given away His identity and the great lesson He was about to set forth would have been lost.

After the disciples tell Jesus (who they believe is a friendly stranger) that they have no food. Our Lord says to them, “Cast the net on the right side of the boat, and you will find some” (Jn. 21:6). The Savior’s command was obviously based on His omniscience (that is, He knew exactly where the fish were) and His omnipotence (as God our Lord controlled the exact path of each fish causing them to enter the apostles’ net). It is interesting that the disciples immediately obeyed the voice of this stranger. It may have been the certainty of the stranger’s voice or the simple fact that all evening nothing had worked, so the disciples may have thought they had nothing to lose by making one more attempt on the right side. In any case, the casting of the net was an amazing success. The net of fish was so heavy the disciple did not even attempt to haul the catch up into the boat, but rather dragged it to shore.

The miraculous catch of fish caused John to recognize that the stranger was in fact Jesus. “Therefore that disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, ‘It is the Lord!’” (Jn. 21:7). Often in the gospels it is John who first understands while Peter is often the first to act. The beloved disciple was the first to believe in the resurrection while Peter was the first to enter and inspect the tomb. Peter is so surprised and excited that he put on his fisher’s coat and plunged into the sea. Since it is unlikely that Peter would put on additional clothes before attempting to swim, the boat was probably in an area shallow enough for Peter to wade to shore. Peter once again shows his nature as a man of action. While his actions may appear a bit hasty to some, we can only admire Peter for his love and zeal toward Jesus. The other disciples followed in the little boat with the net full of fish.

There are a number of things to note regarding this miraculous catch of fish.

(1) This incident would have immediately brought to the mind of these men the calling of some of these same disciples to become fishers of men that is recorded in the synoptic gospels (Mt. 4:18-22; Mk. 1:16-20; Lk. 5:1-11). The account in Luke 5, which is more detailed and fuller than the other gospels, reveals some fascinating similarities between these two events. In Luke 5:4 Jesus tells the disciples (Peter, Andrew, John and James) to let down the nets in deeper water. Peter responds to this request by saying, “Master, we have toiled all night and caught nothing; nevertheless at Your word I will let down the nets” (Lk. 5:5). Peter’s comment reveals that, like the narrative in John 21:3, the disciples’ long efforts had been a complete failure. After the disciples obey our Lord’s instruction, they catch such a large amount of fish that the net begins to break (Lk. 5:6) and a second boat is needed to hold the fish (Lk. 5:7). The boats are so full of fish they begin to sink. In the John 21 narrative, it seems that the disciples remembered what happened at their original call and thus do not even attempt to pull the net of fish into the boat. By carefully pulling the net to shore, it is not torn (Jn. 21:11). The similarity of these events and their occurrence at crucial points of redemption history (one almost at the very beginning of Jesus’ earthly ministry and the other right before the great commission) is not by accident.

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<sup>10</sup> The Greek word originally was used for a relish to be served with bread. See Archibald Thomas Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament*, 5:319.

The disciples would naturally connect this present “sign” to the one before and thus would associate it with their charge to be fishers of men. Our Lord said, “Follow Me, and I will make you fishers of men” (Mt. 4:19; Mk. 1:17). “Do not be afraid. From now on you will catch men” (Lk. 5:10). It would also recall the parable of the dragnet: “the kingdom of heaven is like a dragnet that was cast into the sea and gathered some of every kind” (Mt. 13:47). Now that the Savior has risen from the dead and has been given all power and authority by God, they will have a renewed summons to the work of catching men, but now the work will shift from the tiny nation of Israel to the whole world. The two miracles were substantially the same. Yet, there were differences that pointed to the new situation with the exalted Lord. In the first instance, Jesus was in the boat with the disciples. When our Lord walked the earth in His state of humiliation the disciples could rely on His immediate presence. In the second, Christ stood away from the apostles on shore. The disciples needed to learn that, although in His estate of exaltation the Redeemer would be in heaven, His help would still be with them. They could still rely on the Savior and look to Him to provide their needs.

With all this in mind, we see that chapter 21 is the perfect epilogue to the gospel of John and prelude to the great commission recorded in the synoptic gospels. “Suitably was it the last miracle which they witnessed at the hands of their Master, for it supplied a symbol which would continually animate them to and in their service for Him.”<sup>11</sup>

(2) This incident was designed to show the apostles their complete dependence upon the resurrected living Redeemer for success when preaching the gospel. The apostles had shown great patience and perseverance in their attempt to catch fish. They had labored very hard and exerted themselves all night to the sunrise with absolutely nothing to show for it. Yet, with only a few words from the Master, their net was full. Their needs were met and the catch was a miraculous success. As the disciples had been taught to depend on Jesus during His earthly ministry, they must now learn to trust in His power, guidance and blessing when He is seated in heaven at the right hand of God the Father.

This passage contains an important lesson for every Christian that for both salvation and fruit in evangelism Christ is sovereign. In other words, “A man can receive nothing unless it is given to him from heaven” (Jn. 3:27). Success in evangelism is not due to our own powers of persuasion, use of logic or even perseverance in preaching to a group of people. It is a gift of God that comes forth entirely from His hand. All success is due to Christ and not our own strength or wisdom. Jesus said, “I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing” (Jn. 15:5). The great secret of being a holy and productive Christian is to look to Christ for everything and live in terms of our union with Him. A stem severed from the Savior does not bear fruit but withers and dies. Self-effort in evangelism without the accompanying regenerating power of the Holy Spirit may produce hypocrites, but it cannot produce true converts. John points out that the net that Jesus filled contained large useful fish, 153 in all. It did not contain trash, weeds or useless fish. Paul recognized this teaching when he said, “Who then is Paul, and who is Apollos, but ministers through whom you believed, as the Lord gave to each one? I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the increase. So then neither he who plants is anything, nor he who waters, but God who gives the increase” (1 Cor. 3:5-7).

The biblical doctrine that success in gospel preaching comes from Christ, not ourselves, is very important, for it teaches us to pray and faithfully present the gospel without resorting to humanistic gimmicks and entertainment. Many modern evangelical churches and even a number

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<sup>11</sup> Arthur W. Pink, *Exposition of the Gospel of John*, 3:306.

of professing Reformed churches have adopted a philosophy of evangelism and church growth diametrically opposed to our text. The general idea of modern church growth is to catch men by making the church and the gospel more like the world, or more appealing to the flesh. Such men implicitly teach that since doctrine and the gospel are offensive to the natural man, then doctrine and an explicit presentation of the gospel must recede into the background and be replaced by exciting music, upbeat songs, drama presentations and very non-doctrinal, man-centered sermons. By way of analogy modern churchmen have looked at empty nets not as a reason for prayer and a closer dependence upon Christ, but as an excuse to make new nets. The gospel of Christ crucified and justification by faith alone has been turned into, “If you want a happy, prosperous life let Jesus come into your heart.”

These new nets of human autonomy, will worship and a humanistic gospel do indeed fill quite rapidly; but unlike the nets that the Savior filled with good fish, they are largely filled with useless fish. Today churches often grow to amazing sizes, but they are being filled mostly with unregenerate professors of religion. A gospel that is tailored to satisfy the world will produce a church like the world. The leadership and the people in the pews are not focused on Christ as He is revealed in the Scriptures, but upon the sociological matrix, the excitement, the entertainment, the programs and worldly gimmicks. Tragically, the fact that the new humanistic nets are full, is seen by the people involved as evidence of God’s blessing. But the simple reality is that nets are easy to fill with trash.

Once we understand that success in gospel preaching comes from Jesus alone, we can persevere in our labors for Christ without distress, even if the net catches few fish or if the catch is delayed. If we are faithful in our preaching or witnessing and are praying for success, then we must be content with the amount of fish the Lord brings us. Sometimes God tries preachers so that they would more highly value His blessings. There have been times in history when good preaching yielded little fruit. There have been geographical locations where conversions were very rare. God is sovereign over all of this and there is no point in being distressed about it. The man who interprets such things as a reason to withdraw his hand from gospel labors or, even worse, a reason to water down the gospel message, does not understand the sovereign power of Christ. Our text must also be seen as an exhortation to steadfastness, courage and perseverance in times when faithful preaching appears unproductive for the Savior will bless His gospel and attend it with saving power in His own good time.

## Breakfast with Jesus

Our Lord not only gave the disciples a miraculous catch of large fish, but also had breakfast waiting on shore prepared and ready to eat. “Then as soon as they had come to land, they saw a fire of coals there, and fish laid on it and bread. Jesus said to them, ‘Bring some of the fish which you have just caught.’ 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. 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. Jesus then came and took the bread and gave it to them, and likewise the fish. This is now the third time Jesus showed Himself to His disciples after He was raised from the dead” (Jn. 21:9-14).

The theme of Christ providing for His apostles continues with the wonderful events on shore. The disciples were up all night fishing. They no doubt were both weary and hungry from a long night’s toil. They were obviously excited to see Jesus and were happy about their large

catch of fish. (John notes both the size of the fish and their number, 153). This amount of fish would not only keep the disciples well fed, but would also provide some needed income to travel back to Jerusalem for the coming feast of Pentecost. As we examine this feast with the Savior, once again it is important to note that this narrative shows the Redeemer preparing the apostles for their commission. There are a number of significant things to note about this meal.

First, the breakfast that our Lord prepared was (like the catch of fish) miraculous. One moment the Savior is standing on the shore speaking to the disciples, then, quite mysteriously, Jesus has a meal ready to eat on hot coals. The burning fire, the fish and the bread were supernaturally obtained; they were created by Christ for this occasion. As the preincarnate Son provided manna in the wilderness for the tribes of Israel before their conquest of the land of Palestine, the Redeemer here provides for his apostles before they go out into the world to preach the gospel. This supernatural meal of bread and fish would have reminded the apostles of the feeding of the five thousand near Bethsaida where five loaves and two fishes were multiplied for the crowd (Lk. 9:10-17; Mk. 6:38-44; Mt. 14:16-21; Jn. 6:1-13). This event would reinforce the disciples' faith during their coming labors, hardships and persecutions. The Mediator could and did provide for their needs by His almighty power.

Note that Jesus did not say, "Go and dine"; but, "Come and dine." He teaches us to come to Him to meet all of our needs. He asks us to come to Him for all of the provisions of our faith. He bids us to come and hear His holy Word which will nourish our faith. He wants us to pray to God through Him so that our holiness and faithfulness will grow. He invites us to feast upon all of His ordinances so that we would grow in grace. The Good Shepherd loves to feed and care for His sheep. When times are good and when things are bad Christ wants us to feed upon Him and His work by faith. "It is encouraging to Christ's ministers, whom he hath made fishers of men, that they may depend upon him who employs them to provide for them; and if they should miss of encouragement in this world, should be reduced as Paul to *hunger and thirst*, and *fastings often*, let them content themselves with what they have here; they have better things in reserve, and shall *eat and drink with Christ at his table in his kingdom*, Luke xxii.30."<sup>12</sup>

Moreover, it is noteworthy that our Lord asked the apostles to bring some of the fish to the meal. The Savior desired that His tired, hungry disciples would eat and have their fill. The Savior fed the apostles through both mediate and immediate means. Regeneration is an immediate work of the Holy Spirit upon the heart that in conjunction with the Word begets faith. Yet, once the gift of faith is ours, we must diligently make use of the means of grace to stimulate our faith and contribute to our sanctification.

The bringing of the fish to Christ may also be symbolic of the bringing of souls to the Savior through the preaching of the gospel. In bidding the disciples to bring the fish to Him, "He intimated they would have fellowship together, not only in labouring, but also in enjoying the fruits of it! It reminds us of His words in 4:36: 'He that reapeth receiveth wages, and gathereth fruit unto life eternal: that both he that soweth and he that reapeth may *rejoice together*.'"<sup>13</sup>

Second, the Mediator served the apostles. Jesus not only provided the food for the feast, but He also acted as the host and servant. "Jesus then came and took the bread and gave it to them, and likewise the fish" (Jn. 21:13). This was a great condescension on the part of the resurrected Savior. By this act Christ was demonstrating that in His estate of exaltation His fellowship and service toward the apostles would not cease but continue. The disciples' success was dependent upon our Lord's continuing as a prophet, priest and king. Our Lord provided food

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<sup>12</sup> Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 5:1228.

<sup>13</sup> Arthur W. Pink, *Exposition of the Gospel of John*, 3:314.

and ate with the apostles to prove “that he was true man still, and so doth teach us, that our exalted High Priest continueth [as] our kinsman, and bone of our bone, and flesh of our flesh, still; and that he was going in our nature to take possession for us in heaven.”<sup>14</sup> The ascended King who sits at the right hand of God by His continuous work of the Holy Spirit enables us to comprehend and digest the heavenly food of His Word. Without this continuous care from Christ we would not be built up in the faith and we would not persevere.

Jesus as the Lord of salvation dispenses His mercies. He does not forget His own or keep them at a distance, but personally ministers to them. “[H]e provides plentifully for his people; gives them to eat of the hidden manna, and tree of life, and leads to fountains of living waters; encourages them to eat and drink freely, what is of his own preparing, and at his own expense provided for them.”<sup>15</sup> As the King and Head of the church, the Mediator gives every man his portion (i.e. his gifts and measure of faith). As the judge, He also dispenses all heavenly rewards. To all those persecuted for the faith, our Lord said “great is your reward in heaven” (Mt. 5:12). If we abide in Christ and serve Him and do not turn back, then we are promised the most amazing heavenly reward. “Blessed are those servants whom the master, when he comes, will find watching. Assuredly, I say to you that he will gird himself and have them sit down to eat, and will come and serve them” (Lk. 12:37). The Savior promised the apostles this kind of marvelous reward: “But you are those who have continued with Me in My trials. And I bestow upon you a kingdom, just as My Father bestowed one upon Me, that you may eat and drink at My table in My kingdom, and sit on twelve thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel” (Lk. 22:28-30).

Christ feeds His apostles *before* He asks Peter and, by implication the rest of the disciples, to feed His sheep. In serving the apostles our Lord was setting an example of Christian leadership. Once again we see here a prelude to the great commission and the task of discipling the nations.

Third, John notes that “none of the disciples dared ask Him, ‘Who are You?’” (Jn. 21:12). The disciples recognized Jesus yet were amazed by His appearance. They were probably thinking, “Is it really Jesus?” They knew it was real but they had that, “it must be a dream,” kind of feeling. Out of reverence to the Master, they kept their thoughts to themselves. They had a deep reverence for Christ’s majesty and no doubt were somewhat shocked to be in His presence. They marveled that He who had died and had been raised in glory would come among them and act as a servant. There also was probably an element of humiliation in their silence. “Peter looked with tears in his eyes at that fire of coals, remembering how he had stood and warmed himself when he denied his Master. Thomas stood there, wondering that he should have dared to ask such proofs of a fact most clear. All of them felt that they could shrink into nothing in his divine presence, since they had behaved so ill.”<sup>16</sup> Yet this humility was combined with great joy for their dear Savior was in their presence and was eating a fellowship meal with them. When our Lord returns and we are in His physical presence for the first time, we will bow in silence in awe and reverence for His majesty.

Fourth, the beloved disciple ends this section with an important parenthetical statement. “This is now the third time Jesus showed Himself to His disciples after He was raised from the dead” (Jn. 21:14). John emphasizes that this was the third occasion where Jesus manifested Himself to the disciples as a group. Therefore, in accordance with the biblical principle regarding lawful, convincing evidence in a court the resurrection is firmly established; “so by these three

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<sup>14</sup> George Hutcheson, *The Gospel of John*, 432.

<sup>15</sup> John Gill, *Exposition of the New Testament*, 2:132.

<sup>16</sup> Charles H. Spurgeon, “Breakfast with Jesus,” 35:119.

principal appearances of Christ to his disciples, his resurrection from the dead was confirmed.”<sup>17</sup> Even in the midst of this rich teaching regarding the importance of depending upon the Savior, the evangelist still relates this appearance of the Redeemer as proof of the resurrection. John wants his audience to never separate the gospel and Christian ethics from the concrete historical events of redemption. Those who seek to separate them (modernists, Barthians, neo-evangelicals) undercut the gospel and biblical morality. Even as the beloved disciple shows our Lord preparing the disciples for their specific apostolic work he stops to focus on his major theme of bringing about faith in Jesus as the Messiah—the Son of God.

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<sup>17</sup> John Gill, *An Exposition of the New Testament*, 2:133.