

The Fishers of Men – *John 21:1-14*

Introduction – Many commentators try to argue that John 21 was a later addition to the Gospel, as though John originally intended to end this book at Chapter 20. They do so without any textual evidence but simply on a number of speculations. But like the last chapters of the Lord of the Rings returning to the Shire, John seems to take us where, for the apostles who are going to carry on the ministry of the kingdom, it all began. Back to Galilee. Back to where it all began.

Gone Fishin’ (vv1-4) – These seven of the apostles find themselves in Galilee just as Jesus had predicted, and note that the prediction came in the context of Christ’s prophesy of Peter’s denial and the apostles’ abandonment (Matt 26:31-35). This was reiterated at His resurrection (Matt 28:9-10). This appears to be the first encounter with Jesus in Galilee and certainly is a reversal of sorts of the first calling of Peter and the other fishermen (Luke 5:1-11). To follow Christ for them was to leave their vocation of fishermen and to become “fishers of men.”

Peter decides to return to his vocation, at least for a night, and the others follow him. But there was no apparent blessing and they caught nothing.

Throwing Nets, Drawing in Fish (vv5-10) – Jesus calls from the shore in the early morning asking if they have any food. When they say “no” He tells them to cast the net on the right side of the boat promising they will find some. There were so many fish that they couldn’t draw the net in at first. The disciple whom Jesus loved (John) says to Peter, “It is the Lord!” and Peter girds up his fishing coat and plunges into the water to swim to shore. The first time this happened he had said that he was too much of a sinner to be with Jesus (Luke 5:8). But there comes a time when one realizes that one is too much of a sinner not to be with Jesus.

Just as the fish can’t be caught by the fishermen, so men cannot be caught by the fishers of men unless God draws them. No one comes to the light unless God draws them out of the darkness they love (3:19). Nicodemus comes at night and Jesus tells him he must be born again by the Spirit that blows where He wishes (3:3, 7). Jesus said that no one would come to Him unless the Father granted it (6:65), only His own sheep hear His voice and follow (10:25-27), and that He would draw them to Himself (12:32). And Jesus does draw men to Himself. If you are a Christian, it is because He drew you to Himself (and He did this because He wanted to). It is because He caught you and brought you to Himself. He may have used “fishers of men” in your life, but He is the One who instructed them to cast their nets where you were. And if you are not a Christian, He may be using this very sermon or this series in John to draw you to Himself (20:31). Remember, even some of these disciples had been with Jesus and yet were still doubting (Matt 28:16-17). Faith is not something that you drum up; faith is a gracious gift of God through which we see Jesus as Who He is and are saved (Eph 2:8-9).

153 Fish and the Allusions to Ezekiel’s Temple (v11) – But there is something more in this wrap up of a gospel that was filled with allusions and layers. It is in this gospel that Jesus says, “*destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up*” (John 2:19) alluding to the new temple prophesied in Ezekiel 40-48. It is in this gospel that Jesus said you must be born of water and the Spirit (3:5) which we find in Ezek 36:25-27, and as I said, where Jesus said the Spirit blows where He wishes (John 3:3, 7, Ezek 37:1-14). And of course, in this gospel Jesus told the Samaritan woman that if she knew who she was speaking with, she would ask and He would have given her living water, and that out of her would become a fountain of water springing up to everlasting life (John 4:10, 14). And then at the Feast of Tabernacles He stood and cried out “*If anyone thirst, let him come to Me and drink. He who believes in Me, as the Scripture has said, out of his heart will flow rivers of living water*” (John 7:37-38). This living water flows out of the new temple, Who is Jesus and those who are in Him, the New Jerusalem.

What does this have to do with 153 fish? This number has been mulled over and twisted with all kinds of fanciful interpretations. And it has happened in so many poor ways, we are tempted to say that 153 fish simply means how many fish they hauled in – and just leave it at that. But if we keep in mind all of the allusions to Ezekiel’s temple and then turn to what happens when the water flows out of that temple in Ezek 47, some interesting things start to connect – and it seems to make sense as Jesus draws the disciples back into the new vocation He has for them.

Over and over again in the Old Testament, the sea represented the chaos of the Gentile world and the fish the Gentiles, while the land represented Israel.

Ezekiel 47:1-12 – Here we have flowing out of the temple and the prophet is told to follow the flow. As He does so it measures deeper and deeper until it becomes a mighty river that cannot be crossed. This is not the water of chaos but of a flood that heals. When the river reaches the sea its waters are healed and life is restored. “*There will be a great multitude of fish*” (v9) and “*the fishermen will stand by it from En Gedi to En Eglaim*” (v10). Glorious fishing apparently.

So, we have all of this imagery of the water and the outpouring of the Spirit and then this overflow of living water all over. When would the Spirit be poured out? At Pentecost. And at Pentecost there are 17 nations (or people groups) listed (Acts 2:7-11). This was the first catch. Now in the ancient world there was a practice of encoding numbers in names (called gematria) and they could do this because they used the same symbols for letters and for numbers. We have Roman letters and Arabic numbers. But in Hebrew, the first nine letters were used for numbers 1-9, the next 9 were used for numbers 10-90, and the last five were used for numbers 100-400.

Gedi = 17 (10 = י ; 4 = ד ; 3 = ג)

Eglaim = 153 (40 = מ ; 10 = י ; 30 = ל ; 3 = ג ; 70 = ע)

“*It shall be that fishermen will stand by it from “the spring” of Gedi to “the spring” of Eglaim*” (Ezek 47:10). They begin at “*the spring of 17*” and end at “*the spring of 153*.” When you want to know the fullness of a symbolic number, consider its triangular. If you like bowling, you know the triangular of 4 is 10 and if you like to play pool, you know the triangular of 5 is 15. The triangular of 17 (the first nations receiving the Spirit at Pentecost, the celebration of the first fruits) is 153. And so, the 153 fish could represent the totality of the nations and peoples of the world that will be brought into the kingdom by means of these apostles and the church they grow over time. In John’s Revelation, the great multitude that no one could number came from all nations, tribes, peoples and tongues (Rev 7:9ff). The promise to Abraham was that through his seed all the peoples would be blessed (Gen 12:3). God has highly exalted Jesus and at His name every knee should bow and every tongue confess that Jesus is Lord (Phil 2:9-11).

The Vocation of the Church and the Promises of God (vv12-14) – Jesus had earlier washed the disciples’ feet and now He invites them to a breakfast He has prepared. The church is to commune with Jesus, be washed by Him and fed by Him. But this whole passage also points us to the great commission of the church and that she is to be used by God to draw all men to Himself. Washed, instructed, and fed by Jesus, we are now sent as ambassadors of His kingdom into the world. This fallen world is a world that has been purchased by the Son and promised to the Son by the Father (Psalm 2:7-8).

Dave Hatcher – September 10, 2023