

John 21:1-19: Fishing Lessons with the Resurrected Savior

OUTLINE

Jesus provides the fish
Jesus provides for the fishermen
Jesus provides for the failed fisherman

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After Jesus had resurrected from the dead, He did not ascend into heaven for 40 days, what did He do during this time? No the Mormons are wrong, Jesus did not visit America where a long lost tribe of Israelites from the exile called the Nephites had set up a now lost civilization, appearing to them in a temple in America. We know that Jesus spent some time teaching them about the kingdom of God, Acts 1:3; but from the passage before us it also appears that Jesus gave His one-time fishermen disciples who had been called to be fishers of men a refresher course on how to fish for Him as they fished for men. Jesus is going to issue the Great Commission from a mount in Galilee, Matt. 28:16-20. As He ascends He will repeat those marching orders sending them to the ends of the earth, Acts 1:8. It is a daunting task that is set before them, they have been tasked with being witnesses, not only to the Jews who have rejected Him, but to all the Gentile nations as well. Jesus underlines for them again His power and His grace as He prepares them for the mission. This section is best understood by seeing past events deliberately echoed or repeated to underscore key lessons. We will look at this section under three headings, firstly, we will see that Jesus provides the fish; secondly, we will see that Jesus provides sustenance for the fishermen; thirdly, we will see that Jesus provides grace for a failed fishermen affirming Peter in his calling.

Jesus provides the fish

V1-3, 'After this Jesus revealed himself again to the disciples by the Sea of Tiberias, and he revealed himself in this way. ² Simon Peter, Thomas (called the Twin), Nathanael of Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two others of his disciples were together. ³ Simon Peter said to them, "I am going fishing." They said to him, "We will go with you." They went out and got into the boat, but that night they caught nothing.' Our scene in chapter 21 changes from the locked room of chapter 20, to the Sea of Galilee/Tiberias/Gennesaret. You will remember that Jesus told the women to tell the disciples to go to Galilee Matt. 28:10. Well in obedience to Him they are there. Jesus not only sent them there to protect them from the leaders in Jerusalem, but this was the place where many important moments took place in Christ's ministry and their lives. Jesus walked on water; fed the 5000; calmed the storm. Not only that this is where Jesus called several fishermen to be His disciples. This was a fertile place for important reminders. 7 of the remaining 11 apostles are present, Peter, Thomas, Nathanael, James and John are named but 2 are not. The guess is that these are likely, Matthew; James the less, or Simon the Zealot as these are the only ones of the 12 that are not named in John's gospel. Peter, ever the leader and the doer, now that he is back on home turf resorts to old patterns of behavior and decides to go fishing. There has been a lot of speculation about Peter's state of mind at this point. Is he moping, depressed, having given up any hope of being a disciple of Christ and going back to a life of fishing for fish not men? I don't doubt that Peter would have felt some of these things, but we must remember

that Jesus occurred to Peter on his own before this, Luke 24:34, on the first day of the resurrection. As curious as we are we are not given the details of that conversation. Depressed? Sure, but fully backslidden or in a slough of despond, I doubt it.

As they go our fishing we come across a familiar scene. Luke 5:1-11 reminds us of that day Jesus came to teach seeking to borrow their boat as a place to preach from v3-6, 'Getting into one of the boats, which was Simon's, he asked him to put out a little from the land. And he sat down and taught the people from the boat. ⁴And when he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, "Put out into the deep and let down your nets for a catch." ⁵And Simon answered, "Master, we toiled all night and took nothing! But at your word I will let down the nets." ⁶And when they had done this, they enclosed a large number of fish, and their nets were breaking.' You will remember this was the day Peter told the Lord to depart from him because he was a sinful man, but Jesus told him that he would be a fisher of men.

Now Jesus arrives on the scene, v4-6, 'Just as day was breaking, Jesus stood on the shore; yet the disciples did not know that it was Jesus. ⁵Jesus said to them, "Children, do you have any fish?" They answered him, "No." ⁶He said to them, "Cast the net on the right side of the boat, and you will find some." So they cast it, and now they were not able to haul it in, because of the quantity of fish.' At the Masters instruction they cast out their nets and they are full. The first time this miracle was performed was to demonstrate to these men who were not yet His disciples that He was sent of God, and this miracle was the thing that convicted Peter and led the men to leaving their nets and following Him as disciples. Christ told them then that they would be fishers of men, and this miracle catch shows the power of Christ to fit them for that task. Once again Christ provides the catch, the nets are full by His power. In order to be effective fishers of men we need to learn the lesson well that it is Christ who fills the nets, we merely cast the nets at His word. This sets us free doesn't it. This lets us focus on our job of preaching the message and leaving the work of drawing sinners, of changing hearts, of opening blind eyes to Him. He has brought us into His service, but the power is of Him. if you were about to be sent out into a hostile world to boldly speak of sin, call people to repentance and show that Christ alone is God and Savior, you would need to be assured that this message which the Jews have already rejected will be blessed by His power. Our response to this fact is faithfulness in proclamation; and faithfulness in prayer beseeching His blessing.

Jesus provides for the fishermen

V7-9, 'That disciple whom Jesus loved therefore said to Peter, "It is the Lord!" When Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he put on his outer garment, for he was stripped for work, and threw himself into the sea. ⁸The other disciples came in the boat, dragging the net full of fish, for they were not far from the land, but about a hundred yards off.' It has been said that if Peter is the one to act first; it seems that John is the one who thinks first. Just as John saw the empty tomb and believed Jesus had resurrected before the other disciples, he also recognizes Him first. Peter who had stripped down to his undergarments for work puts on his clothes and jumps into the water. Overeager he abandons the catch leaving it to others to do his job. Since they were able to hear Jesus shouting to them they were not very far off shore. Ever impulsive the others have to bring the boat and the catch in.

V9-14, 'When they got out on land, they saw a charcoal fire in place, with fish laid out on it, and bread. ¹⁰ Jesus said to them, "Bring some of the fish that you have just caught." ¹¹ So Simon Peter went aboard and hauled the net ashore, full of large fish, 153 of them. And although there were so many, the net was not torn. ¹² Jesus said to them, "Come and have breakfast." Now none of the disciples dared ask him, "Who are you?" They knew it was the Lord. ¹³ Jesus came and took the bread and gave it to them, and so with the fish. ¹⁴ This was now the third time that Jesus was revealed to the disciples after he was raised from the dead.' Bread and fish by the Sea of Galilee what does this remind us of? We are of course reminded of the feeding of the 5000. And just as Jesus provided for the 5000 then He provides for His 7 disciples now. V13 has the fish and bread with a definite article indicating that there was likely only 1 fish and 1 loaf of bread, meaning that it is likely that Jesus miraculously multiplied the fish and bread for His disciples that they may eat. Jesus tells them to bring the fish but it is only so that they might see because He feeds them with His own provisions. A tender moment indeed as we see wet and hungry men worn out from a long night of fishing, and Jesus is cooking for them, providing them with a meal, miraculously sustaining them in the work. We cannot help but think of the promise attached to the Great Commission that He is with us always, even to the end of the age. How He commands but equips and provides for where He calls. And in personal attendance meets our needs Himself.

We see Peter hauling the catch in by himself, hauling in 153 large fish, and the nets did not break. Many have suggested the significance of the number 153 but it probably holds no more meaning than to emphasize how large the catch was. And the nets did not break as they did in Luke 5. We cannot help but think about Jesus instruction to the fishermen equipping them to be fishers of men; and the large catch of fish; and then a net filled but does not break. We cannot help but think as many others have done of the final day when every elect of God will be raised up how there will be a multitude without number; and there are no holes in the net, no tears, no weaknesses, each one will be saved. The fish are not only caught but kept until they reach the shore. These are key lessons that Jesus is impressing upon these fishers of men.

Jesus provides for the failed fisherman

V15-17, 'When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?" He said to him, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." He said to him, "Feed my lambs." ¹⁶ He said to him a second time, "Simon, son of John, do you love me?" He said to him, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." He said to him, "Tend my sheep." ¹⁷ He said to him the third time, "Simon, son of John, do you love me?" Peter was grieved because he said to him the third time, "Do you love me?" and he said to him, "Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Feed my sheep.' Peter is a major character in this section, small details about his actions have been put forward while no other disciple but the author gets a special mention. We can clearly see that these events are particularly for Peter as well. The empty net then the miraculous catch would take Peter back to the day he spoke those words, 'depart from me, I am a sinful man', and yet the Lord received him. Jesus uses his birth name Simon 3 times, his name from before he became a disciple and was called Peter, the rock, to remind him from where he has come and the journey of grace that has brought him here. The charcoal fire on the beach would no doubt remind him of the charcoal fire around which he warmed himself on the night Jesus was arrested and around that fire denied Him, John

18:18. We know that 3 times Peter denied that He knew Christ; and we see that three times Jesus asks Peter if he loves Him. On top of that we can see that Jesus alludes to Peter's own words, Matt. 26:33-35, 'Peter answered him, "Though they all fall away because of you, I will never fall away." ³⁴ Jesus said to him, "Truly, I tell you, this very night, before the rooster crows, you will deny me three times." ³⁵ Peter said to him, "Even if I must die with you, I will not deny you!" And all the disciples said the same.'

What are we seeing here? What we are not seeing is a public shaming where Jesus gets a bit of revenge for Peter's failure and tries to make him feel as bad as possible for the terrible things he has done. That is the sort of thing we might do to get revenge, but this is not the Savior's way with our sin. This is more like when you were about 7 years old and you came off your bike on the gravelly foot path and you took a heap of skin off your leg, and there are those little bits of stone that are embedded and some of them have travelled up under the loose skin. Then your mom comes along and as soon as her hand goes near the wound you scream, 'Don't touch it; don't touch it!' She has to touch it, she has to get the dirt out so that it can heal, this is what Christ is doing. Jesus is a spiritual doctor who gave plenty of warnings to Peter, and is now following up his fall in such a way as to highlight sin, increase repentance and restore to grace. Peter was a self-confident man who felt himself better than others, that his strength and love for Jesus was superior to others. Other men might have that weakness but he does not. Jesus reminds Peter that our strengths can be our blind spots and the very place where the devil will catch us. Peter had been warned to watch and pray that he might not enter into temptation, but he chose to sleep instead, not feeling the danger in the warning when Jesus prophesied that he would deny him three times before the next morning. Jesus words, 'Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?' are Jesus way to bring this problem of pride and self-sufficiency to the fore.

Peter is asked three times if he loves Jesus and three times he answers in the affirmative. Now may have tried to make much of the fact that John uses two different Greek words for love. They try to make out as if Jesus is asking Peter are you devoted to me (agape); and Peter answers yes if am affectionate towards you (Philo). They try and suggest that Peter has learnt his lesson and dares not raise up his love to the highest degree. So then the third time Jesus asks if he has affection not devotion. It is a nice idea but John uses these two words for love interchangeably like in John 20:2, 21:17. John uses two words for love; two words for know; and two words for tending, it is probably more stylistic than substantive. Once again this three fold enquiry about love is not a shaming tactic but rather giving Peter the opportunity to reaffirm his commitment to Christ. If someone has betrayed you and then they say 'but I love you,' you don't want to hear it, you don't want to believe it. Jesus is not casting Peter off but giving him the opportunity to reaffirm his love.

Perhaps you would think to yourself that such a public discussion in front of the other disciples about your failures seems too harsh. We have a tendency to hide our sin, to not bring up the sins of others, we like to pretend that we are doing better than we are. Jesus talks openly about sin; He brings it into the light; He names the elephant in the room because unless it gets addressed, have you ever seen what an elephant in your room can do?

We can hear the overtones of grace in Christ's words and this is most evident in the fact that Jesus does not tell Peter that He is finished with him; that he is not

good enough; that he is good for nothing. No Jesus reaffirms his role as an apostle, as a shepherd. 3 times Christ calls him to high service, feed my lambs; tend my sheep; feed my sheep. Notice that the sheep that Jesus has laid down His life for are entrusted to Peter the sinner. Jesus sensitizes Peter to the fact that there are lambs as well as sheep, mature and immature, those who are weak and those who need less help; those who are messy and stubborn and get themselves into trouble and others who can practically take care of themselves. There are those who are vulnerable and need protecting and well as those who have a strength of their own. I cannot help but feel that Peter's restoration into this role is in the background of 1 Pet. 5:1-5, 'So I exhort the elders among you, as a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as a partaker in the glory that is going to be revealed: ² shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you; not for shameful gain, but eagerly; ³ not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock. ⁴ And when the chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory.'

Notice that the job of shepherding has to do with feeding and tending. Feeding is mentioned twice bracketing the responsibility. It is the duty of every pastor to preach the word of God and feed the sheep with the truth of God's word. But they must also tend, with a shepherds eye they must pray, heal wounds, strengthen, carry, protect, and do all that is needed to oversee the flock of Christ for which He laid down His life.

It has been noted that Jesus asks Peter as a shepherd if he loves Christ. The greatest prerequisite for any pastor or elder is that he love Christ. A love for Christ not fame, not respect, not money, not recognition, but Christ is what will best equip a pastor. If you love Christ you will love what He loves, cherish what He cherishes. The sheep will be dearer to you because Christ loves them and you love Him. You will be a shepherd and not a hireling.

Peter being restored to his ministry does raise the question of whether a pastor or elder who has sinned can be restored to their role. This is a difficult one to answer, which sin is worse greed or publicly disowning Christ; lust or cursing Christ? Technically we must insist that restoration is possible, but the difficulty is that this must be balanced with the call for elders to be blameless. There may be a situation where a man has sinned but the public nature of his sin is so bad that the congregation who have to nominate and vote him in cannot do so given the impact of his sins. This would have to be looked at on a case by case basis.

I don't know about you but I am encouraged by Peter's restoration. Christ's death and resurrection results in sinners being used by God whether they are murderers like Paul; proud and impulsive people like Peter, or people like me. God only has sinners in His employ when He sends out the church to fulfil the great commission.

V18-19, 'Truly, truly, I say to you, when you were young, you used to dress yourself and walk wherever you wanted, but when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and another will dress you and carry you where you do not want to go.' ¹⁹ (This he said to show by what kind of death he was to glorify God.) And after saying this he said to him, "Follow me." Peter wanted to fight for Christ and die for Christ but was entrusted with the job of feeding sheep, a more important job than proving yourself better than others. But Peter will have an opportunity to die for Christ. the words of v18 are a bit obscure but they indicate where once

he was free to do what he wanted, but one day when he is old his freedom will be taken away and your hands will be stretched out. V19 interprets this for us saying that Jesus is talking about Peter's death. Tradition has it that he would be crucified upsidedown. And then Christ says follow me. Now if I were going to tell you how you were going to die, you might run away and do everything you could to avoid it. Why does Jesus say this to Peter. Because of the resurrection, our enemies are defeated, we are sent against an enemy that we can now prevail against. However, there will be suffering, but even this suffering is part of God's wise plan, nothing happens to us apart from His will. To reveal it, is to show that it is not the result of chaos but God's sovereign purposes.

After Jesus resurrected from the dead He spent some time with them preparing them for the mission He was calling them to. Here we see these experienced fishermen being given lessons on being fishers of men being reminded that when they fish at His word, they will succeed; that they must not only cast out the nets but bring the fish ashore, but do not fear, the nets will not break, there will be a great catch and every one will reach the shore. Know that when you fish Christ will be with you and minister to your needs personally. Know that Christ is able and willing to use sinners.