***Breakfast with Jesus***

**Easter to Pentecost in John’s Gospel April 21, 2024**

***Jesus said to them, “Come and have breakfast.”  
None of the disciples dared ask him, “Who are you?”   
They knew it was the Lord. Jesus came, took the bread  
and gave it to them, and did the same with the fish.*John 21:12-13**

**The third appearance**

*Afterward Jesus appeared again to his disciples, by the Sea of Tiberias. It happened this way: 2 Simon Peter, Thomas (called Didymus), Nathanael from Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two other disciples were together. 3 “I’m going out to fish,” Simon Peter told them, and they said, “We’ll go with you.” So they went out and got into the boat, but that night they caught nothing.*

*4 Early in the morning, Jesus stood on the shore, but the disciples did not realize that it was Jesus.*

*5 He called out to them, “Friends, haven’t you any fish?”*

*“No,” they answered.*

*6 He said, “Throw your net on the right side of the boat and you will find some.” When they did, they were unable to haul the net in because of the large number of fish.*

*7 Then the disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, “It is the Lord!” As soon as Simon Peter heard him say, “It is the Lord,” he wrapped his outer garment around him (for he had taken it off) and jumped into the water. 8 The other disciples followed in the boat, towing the net full of fish, for they were not far from shore, about a hundred yards. 9 When they landed, they saw a fire of burning coals there with fish on it, and some bread.*

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

*11 Simon Peter climbed aboard and dragged the net ashore. It was full of large fish, 153, but even with so many the net was not torn. 12 Jesus said to them, “Come and have breakfast.” None of the disciples dared ask him, “Who are you?” They knew it was the Lord. 13 Jesus came, took the bread and gave it to them, and did the same with the fish. 14 This was now the third time Jesus appeared to his disciples after he was raised from the dead.*

John 21

1. Rather than abandoning their mission, the disciples were obedient to Jesus’ directions to go to Galilee (Matthew 28:5-10). It would be expected that Mrs. Peter and her mother would send Peter and his friends out to fish.
2. This is the second great catch (see Matthew 5) and the second time after the resurrection that Jesus   
   eats fish with his disciples. There is something about fish and fishing that is important.

3. Should the great catch of fish be understood as a key sign in John’s gospel?

4. Just as Jesus’ breath prepared the embryonic church for Pentecost, Jesus’ cooking prepared his followers for the breadth of the Great Commission.

**Almost sacramental**

1. “Took” and “gave” point back to Jesus’ Last Supper and forward to the church’s sacramental life

*19 And he took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to them, saying, “This is my body given for you; do this in remembrance of me.”*

Luke 22 (See also Luke 24:30-35.)

2. Jesus is teaching his disciples the importance of sharing meals together

*42 They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. 43 Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles. 44 All the believers were together and had everything in common. 45 Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need. 46 Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, 47 praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.*

Acts 2

The first point: It’s not about what we eat but about whom we eat with!

Q 79. Why then does Christ call the bread his body and the cup his blood, or the new covenant in his blood, and Paul use the words, a sharing in Christ’s body and blood?

A.  Christ has good reason for these words. He wants to teach us that just as bread and wine nourish the temporal life, so too his crucified body and poured-out blood are the true food and drink of our souls for eternal life. (1)

But more important, he wants to assure us, by this visible sign and pledge, that we, through the Holy Spirit’s work, share in his true body and blood as surely as our mouths receive these holy signs in his remembrance, (2) and that all of his suffering and obedience are as definitely ours  
 as if we personally had suffered and made satisfaction for our sins. (3)

1 [John 6:51, 55](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=John%206:51,%2055&version=nrsv) 2 [1 Cor. 10:16-17](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=1%20Cor.%2010:16-17&version=nrsv); [11:26](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=1%20Cor.%2011:26&version=nrsv) 3 [Rom. 6:5-11](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Rom.%206:5-11&version=nrsv)

Heidelberg Catechism, Lord’s Day 29 (See Belgic Confession, Article 35, included below.)

**What about the 153 fish?**

1. “Full of large fish” is a picture of God’s plan for his church

*9 Swarms of living creatures will live wherever the river flows. 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. 10 Fishermen will stand along the shore; from En Gedi to En Eglaim there will be places for spreading nets. The fish will be of many kinds—like the fish of the Great Sea.*

Ezekiel 47 (See the Mitch Chase article for more on this topic.)

The second point: This miracle prepared Jesus’ followers for the power of the Great Commission

*18 Then Jesus came to them and said, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. 19 Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, 20 and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”*

Matthew 28 (See Acts 1:8 for Luke’s version of the Great Commission.)

**We are asking John’s three questions – because Doug considers the great catch  
of fish to be one of John’s signs**

Question 1: What is Jesus revealing about the kind of Messiah he will be?

Question 2: What is Jesus revealing about authentic or inauthentic faith?

Question 3: What is Jesus teaching his followers about walking in the light?

1. Jesus is the kind of Messiah who desires to share a meal with his followers

*15 While Jesus was having dinner at Levi’s house, many tax collectors and “sinners” were eating with him and his disciples, for there were many who followed him. 16 When the teachers of the law who were Pharisees saw him eating with the “sinners” and tax collectors, they asked his disciples: “Why does he eat with tax collectors and ‘sinners’?”*

*17 On hearing this, Jesus said to them, “It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.”*

Mark 2:15-17

*9 Then the angel said to me, “Write: ‘Blessed are those who are invited to the wedding supper of the Lamb!’ ”*

Revelation 19

1. Fishing is one of the best metaphors for becoming and making disciples

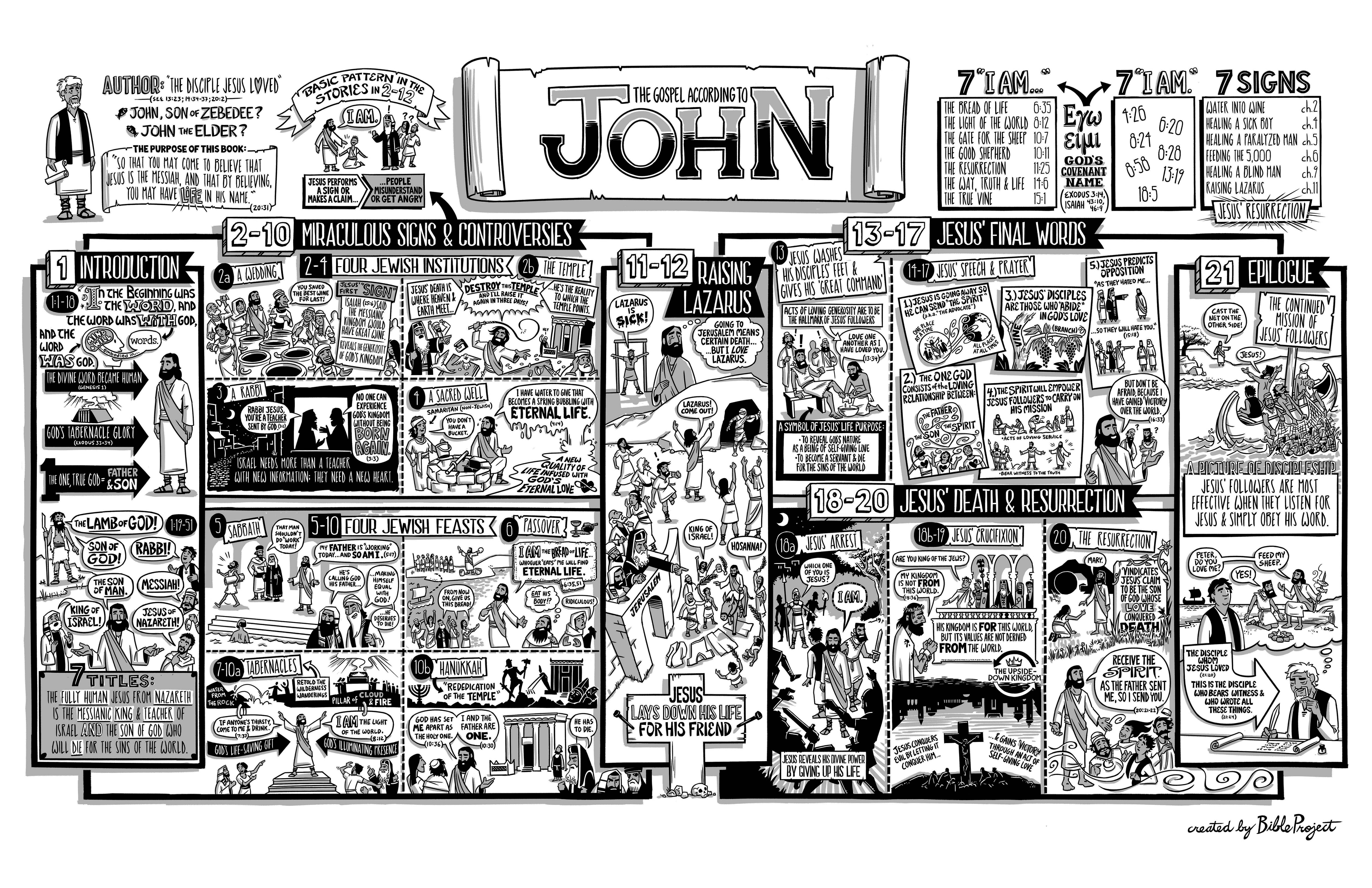
*18 As Jesus was walking beside the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon called Peter and his brother Andrew. They were casting a net into the lake, for they were fishermen. 19 “Come, follow me,” Jesus said, “and I will make you fishers of men.” 20 At once they left their nets and followed him.*

Matthew 4 (See also Luke 5:1-11 for the other “draught of fishes” narrative.)

3. Fishermen toil, but Jesus gives the harvest

   In the first case, Christ was in the ship. Oh, blessed be God, Christ is in his Church, though she launch out into the deep. In the second case, Christ was on the shore. Blessed be God, Christ is in heaven. He is not here, but he has risen; he has gone up on high for us. But whether he be in the Church, or whether he be on the shore in heaven, all our night’s toiling shall, by his presence, have a rich reward.

Spurgeon’s “The Two Draughts of Fishes”  
at [*https://www.spurgeon.org/resource-library/sermons/the-two-draughts-of-fishes/#flipbook/*](https://www.spurgeon.org/resource-library/sermons/the-two-draughts-of-fishes/%23flipbook/)



**Resources for further study**

The Bible Project team does a great job of introducing John’s themes even if it might be too busy at  
[*https://bibleproject.com/downloads/posters/*](https://bibleproject.com/downloads/posters/)

Doug has referenced these commentaries:  
Hendricksen’s *New Testament Commentary* (Baker, 1953)  
D.A. Carson has a great commentary (Eerdmans, 1991)  
Merrill Tenny’s commentary in the *Expositor’s Bible Commentary* (Zondervan, 1981)

J. C. Ryle’s commentary is always helpful at [*https://www.gracegems.org/Ryle/j20.htm*](https://www.gracegems.org/Ryle/j20.htm)

Dorothy Sayers’ “The Man Born to be King” is a wonderful retelling of the story at [*https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wQ-8zhRpD8s*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wQ-8zhRpD8s)

Tim Keller has a classic lecture on belief and skepticism at [*https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C9fmKSwuoDE*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C9fmKSwuoDE)

Bob Deffinbaugh has a good sermon series on the Gospel of John at [*https://bible.org/series/you-might-believe-study-gospel-john*](https://bible.org/series/you-might-believe-study-gospel-john) His sermon on this text is at: [*https://bible.org/seriespage/seeing-and-believing-john-2010-31*](https://bible.org/seriespage/seeing-and-believing-john-2010-31) and [*https://bible.org/seriespage/what-thing-called-love-john-211-25*](https://bible.org/seriespage/what-thing-called-love-john-211-25)

I also appreciated Kim Riddlebarger’s series on John at [*http://kimriddlebarger.squarespace.com/sermons-on-the-gospel-of-john/*](http://kimriddlebarger.squarespace.com/sermons-on-the-gospel-of-john/) . Especially his sermon on the end of John 20 and 21:1-14 at [*http://kimriddlebarger.squarespace.com/sermons-on-the-gospel-of-john/63%20These%20Things%20Were%20Written%20edited.pdf*](http://kimriddlebarger.squarespace.com/sermons-on-the-gospel-of-john/63%20These%20Things%20Were%20Written%20edited.pdf)

Spurgeon’s as a classic sermon on this text at [*https://www.spurgeon.org/resource-library/sermons/the-two-draughts-of-fishes/#flipbook/*](https://www.spurgeon.org/resource-library/sermons/the-two-draughts-of-fishes/%23flipbook/)

Mitch Chase has a god summary of the numerical understanding of the 153 fish at [*https://mitchchase.substack.com/p/14-generations-and-153-fish*](https://mitchchase.substack.com/p/14-generations-and-153-fish)

J.C. Ryle, 1865, at [*https://www.gracegems.org/Ryle/j21.htm*](https://www.gracegems.org/Ryle/j21.htm)

**JOHN 21:1-14**

The appearance of our Lord Jesus Christ after His resurrection, described in these verses, is a deeply interesting portion of the Gospel history. The circumstances attending it have always been regarded as highly allegorical and figurative, in every age of the Church. It may, however, be justly doubted whether commentators and interpreters have not gone too far in this direction. It is quite possible to spiritualize and filter away the narratives of the Gospels, until we completely lose sight of the plain meaning of words. In the present case we shall find it wise to confine ourselves to the great, simple lessons, which the passage undoubtedly contains.

We should observe, for one thing, in these verses, **the poverty of the first disciples of Christ.** We find them working with their own hands, in order to supply their temporal needs, and working at one of the humblest of callings—the calling of a fisherman. Silver and gold they had none, lands and revenues they had none, and therefore they were not ashamed to return to the business to which they had, most of them, been trained. Striking is the fact, that some of the seven here named were fishing, when our Lord first called them to be Apostles, and again fishing, when He appeared to them almost the last time. We need not doubt that to the minds of Peter, James, and John, the coincidence would come home with peculiar power.

The poverty of the Apostles goes far to prove the divine origin of Christianity. These very men who toiled all night in a boat, dragging about a cold wet net, and taking nothing—these very men who found it necessary to work hard in order that they might eat—these very men were some of the first founders of the mighty Church of Christ, which has now overspread one-third of the globe. These were they who went forth from an obscure corner of the earth, and turned the world upside down. These were the unlearned and ignorant men, who boldly confronted the subtle systems of ancient philosophy, and silenced its advocates by the preaching of the cross. These were the men who at Ephesus, and Athens, and Rome, emptied the heathen temples of their worshipers, and turned away multitudes to a new and better faith. He that can explain these facts, except by admitting that Christianity came down from God, must be a strangely incredulous man. Reason and common sense lead us to only one conclusion in the matter. Nothing can account for the rise and progress of Christianity but the direct interposition of God.

We should observe, for another thing, in these verses, **the different characters of different disciples of Christ.** Once more, on this deeply interesting occasion, we see Peter and John side by side in the same boat, and once more, as at the sepulcher, we see these two good men behaving in different ways. When Jesus stood on the shore, in the dim twilight of the morning, John was the first to perceive who it was, and to say, "It is the Lord;" but Peter was the first to spring into the water, and to struggle to get close to his Master. In a word, John was the first to see; but Peter was the first to act. John's gentle loving spirit was quickest to discern; but Peter's fiery, impulsive nature was quickest to stir and move. And yet both were believers, both were true-hearted disciples, both loved the Lord in life, and were faithful to Him unto death. But their natural temperaments were not the same.

Let us never forget the practical lesson before us. As long as we live, let us diligently use it in forming our estimate of believers. Let us not condemn others as graceless and unconverted, because they do not see the path of duty from our stand-point, or feel things exactly as we feel them. "There are diversities of gifts, but the same Spirit." ([1 Cor. 12:4](https://biblia.com/bible/nkjv/1%20Cor.%2012.4).) The gifts of God's children are not bestowed precisely in the same measure and degree. Some have more of one gift, and some have more of another. Some have gifts which shine more in public, and some which shine more in private. Some are more bright in a passive life, and some are more bright in an active one. Yet each and all the members of God's family, in their own way and in their own season, bring glory to God. Martha was "careful and troubled about much serving," when Mary "sat at the feet of Jesus and heard His word." Yet there came a day at Bethany, when Mary was crushed and prostrated by overmuch sorrow, and Martha's faith shone more brightly than her sister's. ([Luke 10:39](https://biblia.com/bible/nkjv/Luke%2010.39), [40](https://biblia.com/bible/nkjv/Luke%2010.40); [John 11:20-28](https://biblia.com/bible/nkjv/John%2011.20-28).) Nevertheless both were loved by our Lord. The one thing needful is to have the grace of the Spirit, and to love Christ. Let us love all of whom this can be said, though they may not see with our eyes in everything. The Church of Christ needs servants of all kinds, and instruments of every sort; pen-knives as well as swords, axes as well as hammers, chisels as well as saws, Marthas as well as Marys, Peters as well as Johns. Let our ruling maxim be this, "Grace be with all those who love our Lord Jesus Christ in sincerity." ([Ephes. 6:24](https://biblia.com/bible/nkjv/Eph.%206.24).)

We should observe, lastly, in these verses**, the abundant evidence which Scripture supplies of our Lord Jesus Christ's resurrection.** Here, as in other places, we find an unanswerable proof that our Lord rose again with a real material body, and a proof seen by seven grown-up men with their own eyes, at one and the same time. We see Him sitting, talking, eating, drinking, on the shore of the lake of Galilee, and to all appearance for a considerable time. The morning sun of spring shines down on the little party. They are alone by the well-known Galilean lake, far away from the crowd and noise of Jerusalem. In the midst sits the Master, with the nail-prints in His hands—the very Master whom they had all followed for three years, and one of them, at least, had seen hanging on the cross. They could not be deceived. Will anyone pretend to say that stronger proof could be given that Jesus rose from the dead? Can any one imagine better evidence of a fact? That Peter was convinced and satisfied we know. He says himself to Cornelius, We "ate and drink with Him after He rose from the dead." ([Acts 10:41](https://biblia.com/bible/nkjv/Acts%2010.41).) Those who in modern times say they are not convinced, may as well say that they are determined not to believe any evidence at all.

Let us all thank God that we have such a cloud of witnesses to prove that our Lord rose again. The resurrection of Christ is the grand proof of Christ's divine mission. He told the Jews they need not believe He was the Messiah, if He did not rise again the third day. The resurrection of Christ is the top-stone of the work of redemption. It proved that He finished the work He came to do, and, as our Substitute, had overcome the grave. The resurrection of Christ is a miracle that no infidel can explain away. Men may carp and cavil at Balaam's donkey, and Jonah in the whale's belly, if they please, but until they can prove that Christ did not rise again we need not be moved. Above all, the resurrection of Christ is the pledge of our own. As the grave could not detain the Head, so it shall not detain the members. Well may we say with Peter, "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has begotten us again unto a living hope by the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead." ([1 Peter 1:3](https://biblia.com/bible/nkjv/1%20Pet%201.3).)

# 14 Generations and 153 Fish

### The first and last chapters of the Four Gospels

[Mitch Chase](https://substack.com/@mitchchase) at [*https://mitchchase.substack.com/p/14-generations-and-153-fish*](https://mitchchase.substack.com/p/14-generations-and-153-fish)

Mar 16, 2023

The New Testament contains four canonical Gospels: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. When we look at how Matthew begins and how John ends, we will notice a particular use of numbers in Matthew 1 and John 21.

Matthew 1 contains a genealogy (Matt. 1:1-17), and it’s divided into three sections (vv. 2-6a, vv. 6b-11, vv. 12-16). After these sections are complete, Matthew summarizes and counts: “So all the generations from Abraham to David were fourteen generations, and from David to the deportation to Babylon fourteen generations, and from the deportation to Babylon to the Christ fourteen generations” (1:17).

Matthew is emphasizing the number 14, and we should wonder why. The answer derives from a way of encoding words, a method called gematria, where each letter of an alphabet has an understood number. When the letters of a word—or name—are added up, the resulting number is the sum of the word through gematria. The number 14 is the sum of David’s name in Hebrew.

## ד ו ד

4   6   4

The reason for the clever use of David’s name has to do with the purpose of the genealogy in Matthew 1. The writer introduces it with v. 1: “The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David…” There is a Davidic shadow over the genealogy. David’s name is then mentioned twice in v. 6, and the remaining names after v. 6 are all descendants of David. Jesus is the promised son of David (1:1, 17). Since Matthew is introducing the story of Jesus as the fulfillment of the Davidic hope, a strategic layout with the number 14 is the way he chose to do it.

If we jump from the opening of the First Gospel to the end of the Fourth Gospel, we will notice that the Four Gospels are bracketed by numbers. In John 21, the risen Jesus is at the shore while his disciples were in a boat fishing. Jesus told them, “Bring some of the fish that you have just caught” (John 21:10). They hauled in a net of 153 fish (21:11).

The specificity of the catch has fascinated interpreters over the centuries, though some readers have been content to say, “We shouldn’t understand that number to mean anything other than demonstrating a huge catch of fish.” There are other ways, however, to communicate a huge catch. In Luke 5:9, the disciples “were astonished at the catch of fish that they had taken” (Luke 5:9).

Why the detail in John 21:10 that the net contained 153 large fish? It’s not even a rounded number—“more than 100” or “150.” It’s so specific. 153. I think the number itself is significant, and the significance is discernible through gematria.

Less than a year ago, Ian Paul wrote an article[1](https://mitchchase.substack.com/p/14-generations-and-153-fish#footnote-1-108640451) connecting the number 153 to Ezekiel 47:9-10: “And wherever the river goes, every living creature that swarms will live, and there will be very many fish. For this water goes there, that the waters of the sea may become fresh; so everything will live where the river goes. Fishermen will stand beside the sea. From En-gedi to En-eglaim it will be a place for the spreading of nets. Its fish will be of very many kinds, like the fish of the Great Sea.”

The number 153 is triangular, the sum of the numbers 1 through 17. And from Ezekiel 47:10, the following sums are found when you add up Hebrew letters:

Gedi = 17

Eglaim = 153

These sums are fascinating. Now consider the context of the verses. It is a fishing context! The language in Ezekiel 47:10 is that fishermen will be beside the sea, nets will be spread, and many kinds of fish will be caught. In John 21, the scene involves the sea and the shore, a net is cast, and many fish are caught.

The 153 literal fish probably symbolize the gospel going to the nations. In Matthew 4:19, Jesus told his disciples, “Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men.” The point wouldn’t be actual fish. The fish are people, sinners in need of a Savior. The mission of the disciples would be catching people, and Jesus would grant them success. In John 21, the enormous catch of fish once again reinforces the disciple-making mission that aims at the nations.

[1](https://mitchchase.substack.com/p/14-generations-and-153-fish#footnote-anchor-1-108640451) Ian Paul’s article: https://www.psephizo.com/biblical-studies/153-fish-three-loves-and-one-call-to-follow-in-john-21/ See also Richard Bauckham’s book The Testimony of the Beloved Disciple, ch. 13.

**Belgic Confession, Article 35**

We believe and confess that our Savior Jesus Christ has ordained and instituted the sacrament of the Holy Supper to nourish and sustain those who are already regenerated and ingrafted into his family,  
which is his church.

Now those who are born again have two lives in them. The one is physical and temporal—they have it from the moment of their first birth, and it is common to all. The other is spiritual and heavenly, and is given them in their second birth—it comes through the Word of the gospel in the communion of the body of Christ; and this life is common to God’s elect only.

Thus, to support the physical and earthly life God has prescribed for us an appropriate earthly and material bread, which is as common to all people as life itself. But to maintain the spiritual and heavenly life that belongs to believers, God has sent a living bread that came down from heaven: namely Jesus Christ, who nourishes and maintains the spiritual life of believers when eaten—that is, when appropriated and received spiritually by faith.

To represent to us this spiritual and heavenly bread Christ has instituted an earthly and visible bread as the sacrament of his body and wine as the sacrament of his blood. He did this to testify to us that just as truly as we take and hold the sacrament in our hands and eat and drink it with our mouths, by which our life is then sustained, so truly we receive into our souls, for our spiritual life, the true body and true blood of Christ, our only Savior. We receive these by faith, which is the hand and mouth of our souls.

# What Is This Thing Called Love? (John 21:1-25)

### Bob Deffinbaugh at [*https://bible.org/seriespage/what-thing-called-love-john-211-25*](https://bible.org/seriespage/what-thing-called-love-john-211-25)

### Introduction

This week I happened to look at a series I did on “Highlights in the Life and Ministry of Jesus Christ” nearly 20 years ago, and there it was, a message on John chapter 21! I don’t “warm up” old messages, but I did find some helpful material from that old message. For one thing, I was in need of a good introduction for this lesson. Frankly, I had forgotten the story I used way back then, but it was so good I’m going to use it again, if you’ll pardon me for doing so.

I have a friend who devised a very clever plan for “getting away” from friends and guests after his wedding ceremony. He and his wife were married in a southern city, which had only one major highway going through town. He and his bride drove slowly from the church, making their way to the edge of town, with no attempt to evade or outrun all their friends who were following behind, honking their horns and just being a general nuisance. The road out of town passed through a tunnel on the outskirts of the city. He had prearranged for a friend to be waiting there. As they approached the tunnel, the friend fell in line, right behind the bride and groom. As soon as the groom’s car entered the tunnel, the friend blocked the tunnel with his car, preventing the others from following any longer.

The newlyweds congratulated themselves for being so shrewd and laughed all the way to their honeymoon hotel, an hour or more down the highway. After a leisurely dinner, they returned to their suite—only to discover that all of their friends were gathered there in their room, waiting for them. Their friends had found them, even though they were some 60 or 70 miles from their hometown! One of them had gone to the trouble of calling every hotel along that highway for many miles to see if my friend had made reservations for that night. These ‘friends’ blessed the newlywed couple with their presence long into the night.

If I were to sum up that situation in one word, it would have to be the word ‘frustrating.’ This newly-married couple never imagined spending their first night of marriage this way, with all their friends gathered in their hotel room. In many ways, “frustrating” also describes what it must have been like for the disciples during that 40-day interval between Jesus’ resurrection and His ascension. With few exceptions,[197](https://bible.org/seriespage/what-thing-called-love-john-211-25#P5636_2262919) the disciples had spent three wonderful years with Jesus. They traveled together, ate together, camped out at night together, and shared a common purse. Their private, relaxing times together were exceedingly few and far between, but at least they were continually in close contact during the time of our Lord’s earthly ministry.

The last few hours our Lord spent with His disciples before His arrest were private and uninterrupted. After the horror of our Lord’s arrest, trials, and crucifixion, it would be tempting to think of this 40-day interval as a time of wonderful fellowship for our Lord and His disciples, but this was not really the case. For one thing, the disciples expected Jesus to immediately commence His kingdom, but it quickly became evident that this wasn’t happening. For another thing, the disciples were not really seeing a great deal of their Lord. After Jesus appeared to them, and they were convinced that He was alive, they were filled with joy. But if the disciples were thinking they would now be spending a lot of time with Jesus once again, they were wrong. Things had changed. This change was first indicated to Mary by our Lord, when He appeared to her after His resurrection:

16 Jesus said to her, “Mary.” She turned toward him and cried out in Aramaic, “Rabboni!” (which means Teacher). 17 Jesus said, “**Do not hold on to me, for I have not yet returned to the Father**. Go instead to my brothers and tell them, ‘I am returning to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God’” ([John 20:16-17](javascript:%7b%7d), NIV, emphasis mine).

Jesus informs Mary that things are no longer going to be as they once were. Jesus was not going to be with His disciples on earth much longer, but was returning to His Father, as He had indicated earlier. He promised that after His ascension, He would dwell among them, and in them, through the Holy Spirit, but at the time they had no idea what He meant.

And so the disciples found themselves relating to Jesus in an entirely different way during this 40-day period of time. They were formerly with Him day and night. Now, they only saw Him from time to time. Eight days passed from the time Jesus first appeared to His disciples ([John 20:19-23](javascript:%7b%7d)) to the time of His second appearance ([John 20:26](javascript:%7b%7d)). He appeared to them only a handful of times in those 40 days (see [1 Corinthians 15:5-7](javascript:%7b%7d)). He came and went in such a way that they never knew when to expect Him. And He did not always look exactly the way He once did—there was something different about Him, which sometimes caused them to wonder whether or not it was really Him (see [Mark 16:12](javascript:%7b%7d); [Luke 24:16, 31](javascript:%7b%7d); [John 21:12](javascript:%7b%7d)). I’m sure the disciples wished for the “good old days,” when they enjoyed much more intimate fellowship with Him. Jesus, however, was “weaning” them from those days, because He would no longer dwell among them as He once had. He was soon to ascend into heaven to be with His Father.

There were other things that made this time difficult. These were perilous days. The tomb of Jesus had been sealed and was under Roman guard, by order of Pilate. When Jesus was raised from the dead, the Jews and the Roman soldiers agreed on a cover-up. They sought to explain the resurrection and the empty tomb by circulating the story that Jesus’ disciples had stolen His body. This would have been a serious crime. The disciples could have been the targets of a manhunt. No wonder they were hiding out in a locked room when Jesus came to them ([John 20:19, 26](javascript:%7b%7d)).

In addition to this, there was really very little the disciples could do during these 40 frustrating days. They were told to wait until they were given power from on high. The Holy Spirit had not yet come, because Pentecost was still a few days away. These men were not yet transformed, nor were they supernaturally empowered to heal the sick, raise the dead, or proclaim the gospel. The kingdom was on hold, there was little for them to do, and Jesus was seldom seen or heard from.

It was not an easy time for the disciples at all. I can imagine that Peter could have gone home, only to find Mrs. Peter standing in the doorway, with her hands on her hips. “Peter,” she might have said sharply, “we’ve got bills to pay and mouths to feed. When are you going back to work? How long are you going to wait around, wondering what to do with yourself?” All of the disciples must have been thinking similar thoughts. They had families to support. They had to do something. They couldn’t just wait around …

Why would we be surprised that it was Peter who decided to do something? Why would we find it unusual for Peter to speak out? This is precisely where the final chapter of John’s Gospel takes up.

### Jesus’ Third Appearance to the Disciples ( 21:1-14)

*1 After this Jesus revealed himself again to the disciples by the Sea of Tiberius. Now this is how he did so. 2 Simon Peter, Thomas (called Didymus), Nathanael (who was from Cana in Galilee), the sons of Zebedee, and two other disciples of his were together. 3 Simon Peter told them, “I am going fishing.” “We will go with you,” they replied. They went out and got into the boat, but that night they caught nothing. 4 When it was already very early morning, Jesus stood on the beach, but the disciples did not know that it was Jesus. 5 So Jesus said to them, “Children, you don’t have any fish, do you?” They replied, “No.” 6 He told them, “Throw your net on the right side of the boat, and you will find some.” So they threw the net, and were not able to pull it in because of the large number of fish. 7 Then the disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, “It is the Lord!” So Simon Peter, when he heard that it was the Lord, tucked in his outer garment (for he had nothing on underneath it), and plunged into the sea. 8 Meanwhile the other disciples came with the boat, dragging the net full of fish, for they were not far from land, only about a hundred yards. 9 When they got out on the beach, they saw a charcoal fire ready with a fish*[*198*](https://bible.org/seriespage/what-thing-called-love-john-211-25#P5648_2268959) *placed on it, and bread. 10 Jesus said, “Bring some of the fish you have just now caught.” 11 So Simon Peter went aboard and pulled the net to shore. It was full of large fish, one hundred fifty-three, but although there were so many, the net was not torn. 12 “Come, have breakfast,” Jesus said. But none of the disciples dared to ask him, “Who are you?” because they knew it was the Lord. 13 Jesus came and took the bread and gave it to them, and did the same with the fish. 14 This was now the third time Jesus was revealed to the disciples after he was raised from the dead.*

For the third time in John’s Gospel, our Lord appears to His disciples. This time He reveals Himself to seven of His disciples as they are fishing on the Sea of Tiberias—the Sea of Galilee ([John 6:1](javascript:%7b%7d)). Most of these men were fishermen by trade. When Peter informed them that he was going fishing, they knew he was not planning to go out and do a little fly fishing on the Sea of Galilee, hoping to catch a fish or two. They understood that Peter was going back to work as a fisherman. They all must have had financial obligations they needed to meet. In addition, they needed to eat. And so those who were with Peter agreed to go fishing with him. There seemed to be nothing better to do. I do not find this decision to go fishing something unbefitting for a disciple. It was better for them to be doing something productive than nothing at all.

I do not think it is possible to understand the meaning of the miracle which occurred here on the Sea of Tiberias without recalling the miracle that took place some time earlier, perhaps at this same spot. This earlier miracle is recorded in the Gospel of Luke:

1 Now Jesus was standing by the Lake of Gennesaret, and the crowd was pressing around him to hear the word of God. 2 He saw two boats by the lake, but the fishermen had gotten out of them and were washing their nets. 3 He got into one of the boats, the one which was Simon’s, and asked him to put out a little from the land. Then Jesus sat down and taught the crowds from the boat. 4 When he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, “Put out into the deep water and lower your nets for a catch.” 5 Simon answered, “Master, we worked hard all night and caught nothing! But at your word I will lower the nets.” 6 When they had done this, they caught a great many fish; and their nets began to break. 7 So they gestured to their partners in the other boat to come and help them. And they came and filled both boats, so that they were about to sink. 8 But when Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus’ knees, saying, “Go away from me, for I am a sinful man, Lord!” 9 For Peter and all who were with him were astonished at the catch of fish that they had taken, 10 and so were James and John, sons of Zebedee, who were Simon’s business partners. Then Jesus said to Simon, “Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people.” 11 So when they had brought their boats to shore, they left everything and followed him ([Luke 5:1-11](javascript:%7b%7d)).

The first miraculous catch of fish came fairly early in the ministry of our Lord. Jesus was teaching beside the Sea of Galilee, and the crowds were pressing in on Him. There were at least two boats pulled up on shore nearby. One belonged to Peter and his brother Andrew, the other to James and John (and apparently their father—see [Matthew 4:18-22](javascript:%7b%7d)). These men had been out fishing all night, unsuccessfully, and were now washing their nets. Jesus got into Simon Peter’s boat and asked him push out from shore, so that He could use the boat as His speaker’s platform. When Jesus finished teaching, He told Peter to launch out into deeper waters and to lower the nets for a catch. Peter gently protested, informing Jesus that they had just spent the entire night fishing, without success. Nevertheless, Peter did as his Master instructed. As the nets were drawn in, it was evident that they had a huge catch of fish, so large that the nets were beginning to tear. Peter and his brother gestured to their partners, James and John, who came alongside with their boat. They filled both boats so full with the fish that they began to sink. Peter fell at Jesus’ knees (they were still in the boat) and said, “**Go away from me, for I am a sinful man, Lord!**” ([Luke 6:8](javascript:%7b%7d)). Jesus comforted the men with these words, “**Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people**” (6:9). It would seem that from this point in time, they ceased fishing for their livelihood and followed Jesus wherever He went.[199](https://bible.org/seriespage/what-thing-called-love-john-211-25#P5653_2273762)

In [John 21](javascript:%7b%7d), we read of a very similar miraculous catch of fish. It is my opinion that it took place at virtually the same place, with the same boats, and most of the same fishermen. You will recall that before His crucifixion, Jesus told His disciples that He would go ahead of them to Galilee ([Matthew 28:7](javascript:%7b%7d); [Mark 14:28](javascript:%7b%7d)). Then, after His resurrection, Jesus instructed His disciples to meet Him in Galilee ([Matthew 28:10](javascript:%7b%7d); [Mark 16:7](javascript:%7b%7d)). The disciples who have gone fishing with Peter may very well be in Galilee because they have done what Jesus instructed them to do—go to Galilee, where He will meet them. This took them out of Jerusalem and Judea, the source of the strongest Jewish opposition. Like most of the disciples, Peter was a Galilean. These were his old “stomping grounds.” If they had been waiting for some time, Peter might well have concluded that they may as well occupy themselves by doing something profitable. And so he announced to his colleagues that he was going fishing.

In my mind’s eye, I can almost see Peter and the others fishing in the same waters where the miracle in [Luke 5](javascript:%7b%7d) took place.[200](https://bible.org/seriespage/what-thing-called-love-john-211-25#P5656_2275122) Peter’s boat and net were apparently available nearby. Why not make use of them and go fishing? It is what these men had done most all of their lives. And so they set out to fish through the night.[201](https://bible.org/seriespage/what-thing-called-love-john-211-25#P5657_2275628) On a typical night of fishing, I would suppose they might have caught a few larger fish.[202](https://bible.org/seriespage/what-thing-called-love-john-211-25#P5658_2276306) They would do this by repeatedly spreading their nets out in the water and then drawing the ends of the nets together, entrapping their catch. Each time their nets were drawn in, a handful of fish might be obtained. Over and over again the nets would be played out and then drawn in; sometimes there were fish within, and sometimes not. When the night was over, the fishermen would hope for enough fish to feed themselves and their families, and perhaps enough fish left over to sell.

On this night ([John 21](javascript:%7b%7d)), like that night a couple of years before ([Luke 5](javascript:%7b%7d)), these fishermen had cast out their nets and drawn them in repeatedly through the night, with absolutely no success. As morning light was approaching, they decided to give it up. (I wonder what the others thought of Peter’s idea now.) I believe they were approaching the place where Jesus had taught the crowds earlier, the place where their boats were pulled up on shore, and where they washed their nets. Someone was standing on the beach, hardly distinguishable from 100 yards away. He called out to these weary, unsuccessful, fishermen, “**Children, you don’t have any fish, do you?**” (21:5).

I can still remember the way my little brother, Danny Boy (as we then called him—probably no more than 4 or 5 years old at the time), would approach the fishermen as they made their way back to their car after they had finished fishing for the day. He would stand there in his coveralls, with his hands tucked into his pockets and ask the men, “Did ya’ catch anything?” (I wish I could reproduce the exact way he pronounced his words at that age.) His question was hopeful. Very often, the answer was, “Yes,” and the fishermen would gladly take out their catch and show it to Danny. That did not happen here. Jesus’ question was asked in such a way that we could translate it, “You didn’t catch any fish, did you?” I love their terse response: “No.” They really didn’t want to talk about it. Can you blame them? These professional fishermen came back, skunked.

I know this form of question and answer all too well, from painful experience. When I started teaching school, Jeannette and I lived close to a part of Puget Sound, and I was “hooked” on fishing, particularly salmon fishing. A friend had a 16 foot long plywood boat, constructed largely of one-inch thick plywood. It was a heavy boat! Every time I borrowed it, I had to drag it from the boathouse on the beach, over the driftwood, and down to the water’s edge. (I don’t know why, but it seemed as though the tide was always out when I went fishing.) I would fish for a couple of hours before dark, and then I had to winch the boat back into the boathouse. Time after time I came back empty-handed. It got to the point where I knew what Jeannette was going to say when I arrived home: “You didn’t catch anything, did you?” The second question was equally certain: “Why don’t you quit?”

Jesus knew that these men had worked all night and had caught nothing. I am tempted to think that Jesus actually orchestrated things so that these men would not catch anything. Anyway, Jesus let the fishermen know that He knew they had caught nothing. He then instructs them to cast out their nets on the right side of the boat, assuring them that when they do so, they will find some fish. I don’t know why these weary fishermen did it, but for some reason they were willing to make one last effort. When they drew in their nets, they did not contain just a few fish, or even a lot of fish. Their nets were virtually filled with fish.

It was at this point that John seems to have realized what was happening. Instinctively, he knew that the man on the beach was Jesus. And now that he knew, he told Peter as well. That was all it took for Peter. He tucked in his outer garment and plunged into the sea, swimming to shore to see Jesus. Someone has remarked that what we find here is typical of both Peter and John. John was the first to understand; Peter was the first to act.[203](https://bible.org/seriespage/what-thing-called-love-john-211-25#P5664_2280336) We cannot be sure that Peter actually arrived on shore first. One thing does seem certain: Jesus must have personally forgiven and restored Peter on His previous, private meeting with him (see [Luke 24:34](javascript:%7b%7d); [1 Corinthians 15:5](javascript:%7b%7d)). Peter certainly shows no reluctance to see Jesus face to face here!

If I were one of the other disciples, I would have been perturbed with Peter for leaving me behind with a full net and an unsecured boat, still several hundred feet from shore. They seem to have learned from the miracle in Luke chapter 5 that it was unwise to try to empty the net full of fish into the boat—since their two boats nearly sank on that occasion. And so they simply drug their bulging nets behind the boat and made their way to shore, with their nets still in the water, teaming with fish.

When the disciples landed on the beach, they observed that Jesus had already prepared a charcoal fire, with fish placed on it, and there was bread as well. Jesus told them to bring some of the fish they had caught, and so Simon went and drew the nets up on shore. John tells us that the nets did not tear as they had begun to do on their first miraculous catch. I think this was especially unusual with the quantity of fish, and given the fact that the fish, still in the nets, were drug up on shore. Nets were not made for this kind of abuse.

Jesus then invites the disciples to join Him for breakfast. We are not actually told that they ate some of their fish for breakfast, and I am inclined to believe that Jesus supplied their entire meal. This was true of the bread, it would seem, and I think it was true as well for the fish. If Jesus had not already prepared a sufficient quantity for all these men (something a little hard to believe), then He could simply have fed them the same way He fed the 5,000, on the other side of the sea. These men had worked hard to provide for themselves, and they had nothing to show for it. Then they come to Jesus, who has more than enough to meet their needs. And in the process, He provides this great catch, enough to supply for their future needs.[204](https://bible.org/seriespage/what-thing-called-love-john-211-25#P5668_2282694) I suspect that Jesus had them bring some of their fish so they could actually see how great the catch was. John tells us it was 153 large fish. Much has been made of the number 153,[205](https://bible.org/seriespage/what-thing-called-love-john-211-25#P5669_2283122) but it may be enough to note that the author knew the exact number of fish caught, and that it was a great quantity. Such details give credibility to one’s testimony, and John certainly provides us with details.

Once again, it would seem as though Jesus did not look exactly as He did before His death and resurrection. Even after the disciples had gotten close enough to get a good look at Jesus, they were still wondering to themselves, “Is this really Him?” They wanted to ask, but no one dared. They knew it was Jesus, but He probably did not look exactly as He had before, and so they just found it hard to believe.

So what does this miraculous catch of fish accomplish? What message was it supposed to send to the disciples, and to us? Let me begin by pointing out that it sets the scene for what follows in verses 15-25. In verses 1-14, Jesus feeds His disciples. In verses 15 and following, Jesus speaks to Peter about feeding His sheep.

I believe there are lessons to be learned from this miracle in the light of its similarity to the great fish harvest of [Luke 5](javascript:%7b%7d). Because of the fishing miracle in [Luke 5](javascript:%7b%7d), Peter and the other disciples came to see Jesus (and themselves) in a whole new light. There, Peter realizes he is not worthy to be in the same boat with Jesus. In [John 21](javascript:%7b%7d), Peter and the others are once again awed by our Lord and His works. In both texts, these professional fishermen were not able to catch anything on their own, even though they were laboring in the area of their expertise. Jesus taught them that He is the source of their success, He is the One Who, when obeyed, makes men fruitful fishermen. In [Luke 5](javascript:%7b%7d), the disciples were called to leave their fishing boats and to become “**fishers of men**” (5:10). I believe that [John 21:1-14](javascript:%7b%7d) is a reaffirmation of that original call. The disciples are all waiting around, wondering what to do with their lives. I believe that by means of this miracle Jesus reiterates and reinforces their original call, which came in [Luke 5](javascript:%7b%7d).

There are some interesting differences in these accounts as well—and lessons to be learned from them. The most obvious (and probably the most important) difference is that in [Luke 5](javascript:%7b%7d), Jesus was in the boat. In [John 21](javascript:%7b%7d), Jesus is on the shore. You may think I am pressing the limits of this story, but there is a lesson here: “Jesus is able to guide, to provide for, and to watch over His disciples just as well (better?) from a distance, as He is able to care for them “up close and personal.” From 100 yards away, Jesus knew they had caught no fish. From 100 yards away, Jesus could guide them to an abundance of fish. Even before they saw Him, Jesus was prepared to provide for their needs. He had breakfast “on the table,” so to speak, when they arrived on shore. Were the disciples uneasy about Jesus going away, about Jesus leaving them to return to His Father? Such fears are unfounded. He is just as able to care for them when He is in heaven as He was to care for them while He was on earth. I think this was a significant part of the lesson He wanted them to learn.

Having fed His disciples fish and bread, Jesus will now speak to Peter about “feeding His sheep.” Having spoken more about *evangelism* in verses 1-14, Jesus is now about to speak to His disciples about *discipleship*. Let us notice how our Lord builds upon this miracle of the great harvest of fish.

### From Fish to Sheep, From Catching to Caring For (21:15-23)

*15 Then when they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, “Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these do?” He replied, “Yes, Lord, you know I love you.” Jesus told him, “Feed my lambs.” 16 Jesus said a second time, “Simon, son of John, do you love me?” He replied, “Yes, Lord, you know I love you.” Jesus told him, “Shepherd my sheep.” 17 Jesus said a third time, “Simon, son of John, do you love me?” Peter was distressed that Jesus asked him a third time, “Do you love me?” and said, “Lord, you know everything. You know that I love you.” Jesus replied, “Feed my sheep. 18 I tell you the solemn truth, when you were young, you tied your clothes around you and went wherever you wanted,*[*206*](https://bible.org/seriespage/what-thing-called-love-john-211-25#P5678_2288348) *but when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and others will tie you up and bring you where you do not want to go.” 19 (Now Jesus said this to indicate clearly by what kind of death Peter was going to glorify God.) After he said this, Jesus told Peter, “Follow me.” 20 Peter turned around and saw the disciple whom Jesus loved following them. (This was the disciple who had leaned back against Jesus’ chest at the meal and asked, “Lord, who is the one who is going to betray you?”) 21 So when Peter saw him, he asked Jesus, “Lord, what about him?” 22 Jesus replied, “If I want him to live until I come back, what concern is that of yours? You follow me!” 23 So the saying circulated among the brothers and sisters that this disciple was not going to die. But Jesus did not say to him that he was not going to die, but rather, “If I want him to live until I come back, what concern is that of yours?”*

I am inclined to understand verses 1-14 in terms of evangelism—being fishers of men. But it is not enough to simply bring a lost sinner to faith in Jesus Christ; that person should also be discipled, and thus brought to maturity in Christ. This seems to be implicit in the Great Commission:

18 Then Jesus came up and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. 19 Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, 20 teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age” ([Matthew 28:18-20](javascript:%7b%7d)).

As we approach these very familiar verses in John’s Gospel, it seems necessary to make a few introductory comments about this text:

*First, in my opinion, Jesus is not seeking to correct (or even rebuke) Peter here for his three-fold denial.* Jesus personally revealed Himself to Peter, probably before He appeared to the disciples as a group ([1 Corinthians 15:5](javascript:%7b%7d); [Luke 24:34](javascript:%7b%7d); [Mark 16:7](javascript:%7b%7d)). I believe it is there that our Lord dealt with Peter’s three-fold denial, and forgave him. In our text, Peter is eager to be with our Lord. I believe this is because Peter’s sins have already been confronted and forgiven, and thus he has already been restored to fellowship with the Master.

*Second, I certainly do not agree with Roman Catholicism’s interpretation and application of this text, which seeks to establish the primacy of Peter as the first pope*. D. A. Carson writes: “[Matthew 16:13-20](javascript:%7b%7d) certainly establishes a unique role for Peter in the founding of the church. … It does not establish him in a position of ruling authority over other apostles. As for [John 21:15-17](javascript:%7b%7d), neither founding pre-eminence nor comparative authority is in view.”[207](https://bible.org/seriespage/what-thing-called-love-john-211-25#P5684_2291472)

*Third, I am not even inclined to see this text as Peter’s restoration to leadership.* There are some scholars who hold that Peter was restored to fellowship in his private interview with Jesus, and that this incident is his public restoration to leadership. I see the emphasis of this passage falling on humble service, not on leadership, per se.

*Fourth, this passage is more about love than about leadership.* Love for Jesus is demonstrated by faithfully caring for His sheep. Let me attempt to illustrate this. The nation is at war, and a son receives notification that he has been drafted into the armed forces. The son ships out, leaving his loving parents behind. He also leaves behind his most prized possession, a 1930 Ford Model A coupe. Do you think that the father of this son will simply allow that car to sit out in the weather, unattended? Do you think he will now use it to haul his trash to the dump? No; the father will wash and wax and tenderly care for that car, because it is the expression of his love for his son, in the son’s absence. *So, too, when we care for the sheep whom our Lord loves, and for whom He gave His life, we show our love for the Shepherd.*

*Fifth, caution should be exercised in making too much of the two different words for “love” which are employed in this text.* The two verbs are *agapao* and *phileo*. The first two times Jesus asks Peter if he loves Him, the word for love is *agapao*. The third time Jesus asks, He employs the term *phileo*. Every time Peter responds to Jesus’ question, indicating his love, he employs the word *phileo*. The distinctions that some make between these two terms may hold true in some cases, and for some authors. They do not seem to hold true for John, who often uses different terms for the same concept. When commentators do seek to emphasize the distinctions between the two Greek words John uses, they do not agree as to what the meaning and emphasis of these terms are. We should keep in mind that when Jesus spoke to Peter and asked him these three questions, He spoke not in Greek (the language in which the Gospel of John is written), but in Aramaic, the language spoken by the Jews of that day. The change in words may have some significance, but I hardly think it is the key to understanding the passage.

When they had finished breakfast, Jesus turned to Simon Peter and asked, “**Simon, son of John, do you love Me more than these do?**”[208](https://bible.org/seriespage/what-thing-called-love-john-211-25#P5689_2293995) Our Lord’s addition of the words, “**more than these do**,” really got to the heart of the matter. Our Lord’s prediction of Peter’s denials came in the midst of Peter’s confident boasting that even if all the others denied Jesus, he certainly would not. In other words, Peter was claiming a higher level of devotion than the rest. Jesus is simply asking him to re-evaluate his boastful claim. And this Peter did. Peter could truthfully affirm that he did love Jesus, but he would not go so far as to claim that his love was greater than that of his fellow-disciples. He also speaks of his love in terms of the Savior’s assessment of it: “**Yes, Lord, You know I love You**.” To this our Lord replied, “**Feed My lambs**.”

How Peter wished that Jesus would leave it at that. But Jesus will ask the question two more times, so that this conversation is understood in relation to that occasion when Peter denied his Master three times.[209](https://bible.org/seriespage/what-thing-called-love-john-211-25#P5691_2295353) And so Jesus asks Peter a second time, “**Simon, son of John, do you love Me?**” Peter replies with the identical words he spoke in answer to the first question, “**Yes, Lord, You know I love You**.” Jesus responded, “**Shepherd My sheep**.”

It was when Jesus asked the same question the third time that Peter was deeply grieved, “**Simon, son of John, do you love Me?**” It was not that Jesus changed from *agapao* to *phileo* that troubled Peter. Peter was grieved because Jesus found it necessary to ask virtually the same question three times. I do not like to be asked the same question repeatedly. I conclude that either the person asking the question wasn’t paying attention (this could not be the case with Jesus), or that my answer was not acceptable or credible. The three-fold repetition must have registered with Peter as being related to his three-fold denial. Peter was grieved because he realized that the bold and even arrogant claims he had made proved to be empty. Peter is not distressed with Jesus; he is grieved over his own sin. Jesus is not attempting to shame Peter; he is seeking to reaffirm his call to service. Did Jesus question Peter about his love for Him three times? Then note that three times Jesus instructed Peter to care for His sheep. Does Peter fear he has been cast aside as useless? Jesus tells him to return to His[210](https://bible.org/seriespage/what-thing-called-love-john-211-25#P5693_2297665) work, three times!

Peter really did love Jesus. But Peter needed to understand that his love for the Savior was not as great as he thought, just as his ability to catch fish was not as great as he seemed to think. In loving, and in landing fish, Jesus was supreme. Even in the thing Peter did best (fishing), he could not hold a candle to Jesus, who proved to be far better at fishing than he. Peter sought to prove his love for Jesus by boasting about it, by arguing with his fellow-disciples about it (see [Luke 22:24](javascript:%7b%7d)), and by being the first to draw his sword and lop off an ear, or perhaps even by being the first man into the water and onto the shore. These were not the benchmarks our Lord had established for testing one’s love for Him. The proof of one’s love for God is *sacrificial service*[211](https://bible.org/seriespage/what-thing-called-love-john-211-25#P5695_2298592)—feeding our Lord’s sheep.

The way I understand verses 15-19 is something like this: “Peter, do you really love Me as much as you say? Then prove your love for Me by taking care of My sheep.” Jesus is the “**Good Shepherd**,” Who cares for His sheep (see [John 10](javascript:%7b%7d)). If Peter really loves his Lord, then his passion will be the Lord’s passion. Jesus came to be the “**Good Shepherd**.” If Peter really loves the Lord, he will be a good shepherd, and shepherds shepherd by feeding the lambs, by caring for the weakest and most vulnerable of the flock. Jesus is the “**Good Shepherd**”; He is the Shepherd who came to lay down His life for His sheep. If Peter really loves Jesus, he will care for the Master’s sheep, and he, like the Master, will lay down his life for the sheep. Love manifests itself in service—humble, sacrificial, service.

You become like the people you love. The things they love, you love. If Peter really loves his Lord, Who is the Good Shepherd, then Peter will surely seek to shepherd in the same way. He will seek the lost sheep (evangelism). He will feed and tend the young and vulnerable lambs (discipleship). And, like the Good Shepherd, he will lay down his life for the sheep. That is why the Lord moves so quickly and easily from verses 15-17 to verses 18 and 19. Peter had assured his Lord that he was willing to die for Him ([Matthew 26:35](javascript:%7b%7d)), and so he will. But he will not die in the manner that he once supposed—seeking to keep His Master from being arrested and crucified. Peter will die, as the Savior did, as a good shepherd, and for the sake of the gospel.

Notice that Jesus does much more than predict Peter’s death. John wishes us to understand that Jesus went so far as to predict the way in which Peter would die: “**(Now Jesus said this to indicate clearly by what kind of death Peter was going to glorify God.)**” (verse 19). Peter’s previous effort to resist the arrest of Jesus was contrary to the gospel, and this is why Jesus rebuked him and abruptly ordered him to stop resisting His arrest. The death which Peter will experience is a death that will glorify God. Jesus also indicates that Peter will die in his old age, and thus he is informed that his death is not imminent. But his death for the Savior’s sake is certain: “I tell you the solemn truth, when you were young, you tied your clothes around you and went wherever you wanted, but when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and others will tie you up and bring you where you do not want to go” (verse 18). Some see in these words only a vague and general reference to the manner of Peter’s death, but this does not square with John’s explanation in verse 19, which seems to be a more specific prophecy. I agree with those who see here a prophecy that Peter truly will follow Jesus, by dying on a Roman cross:

More important is the way *stretch out your hands* was understood in the ancient world: it widely referred to crucifixion (Haenchen, 2. 226-227). … Bauer (p. 232) proposed long ago that this ‘stretching’ took place when a condemned prisoner was tied to his cross-member … and forced to carry his ‘cross’ to the place of execution. The cross-member would be placed on the prisoner’s neck and shoulders, his arms tied to it, and *then* he would be led away to death.[212](https://bible.org/seriespage/what-thing-called-love-john-211-25#P5700_2302164)

The words, “**Follow Me**,” constitute the first calling of the disciples ([Matthew 4:19](javascript:%7b%7d); [Mark 1:17](javascript:%7b%7d); [John 1:43](javascript:%7b%7d)). As time passed, these words took on a much deeper meaning. Following Jesus meant putting Jesus above family ([Matthew 8:22](javascript:%7b%7d)). It meant a whole new way of life, where former practices would be unacceptable ([Matthew 9:9](javascript:%7b%7d); [Mark 2:14](javascript:%7b%7d)). Before long, Jesus let His disciples know that following Him meant taking up one’s cross ([Matthew 16:24](javascript:%7b%7d); [Mark 8:34](javascript:%7b%7d)). (At this point in time, our Lord’s reference to “taking up one’s cross” was, at best, understood metaphorically.) For the rich young ruler, it meant giving up his possessions ([Matthew 19:21](javascript:%7b%7d); [Mark 20:21](javascript:%7b%7d)). And now, for Peter, it means not only carrying on the Master’s work, but taking up a very literal cross. It would seem that at every point where following Jesus is more precisely defined, another challenge to follow Him is given. So it is in our text.

I fear that Christians today understand these two words, “Follow me,” in a most shallow and superficial way. When Paul writes, “**For to me to live is Christ and to die is gain**” ([Philippians 1:21](javascript:%7b%7d)), we interpret his words in a somewhat hedonistic fashion. We suppose that Paul means living as a Christian is glorious, trouble-free, and fulfilling. It is, to put it plainly, “the good life.” In other words, we get to live it up here, and then when we die, it gets even better. There is a certain sense in which this is true. But we must understand Paul’s words in the light of what Jesus is telling Peter here, in our text, about following Him. To follow Christ is to walk in His steps, to live as He lived, to serve others as He did, and to lay down your life for the sheep, like Him. In Philippians chapter 1, Paul is therefore saying, “For me, to live is to live just as Christ did, taking up my cross daily, laying down my life for His sheep.”

Peter got the message. He was willing to lay down his life for the Savior. But why was Jesus singling him out? What about the rest? What about John? At some point, it appears that Jesus and Peter have gone off by themselves, apart from the others. Verse 20 seems to indicate that Jesus and Peter are walking by themselves, with John following behind, at a distance. Peter turns around and sees John, some distance away. He and John had been closely associated in the fishing business, and even as disciples. Later, they will work very closely together as apostles, as we see in the Book of Acts. Peter could not resist asking Jesus about John’s fate. If Peter had to die to follow Jesus, was this also true of John?

When I was growing up, I had two sisters and one brother. I was especially competitive with my older sister. Whenever we had pie, you had better believe that she and I were eyeing each piece, to make sure that the other didn’t get a bigger piece than we did. We had such a keenly developed sense of weight and size that we could have worked for the Federal Bureau of Standards. We did not wish for our rival sibling to get more than what we got. We expected complete equality. Peter seems to have the same attitude toward suffering. If he had to suffer, then surely John should be expected to suffer in just the same way, for the same period of time.

How easy it is for us to stand back, far removed in space and time, and criticize Peter for his foolish words. Let us remember that Peter does not have the depth of field that we have. He has not yet come to grasp the full impact of the death, burial, and resurrection of our Lord. He has not yet experienced the presence and power of the Holy Spirit, Who will come shortly, at Pentecost. Peter cannot yet look upon dying for Christ as a high calling, as a privilege. He views it only as a sacrifice, and thus he wishes to be sure that every other disciple pays the same price.

It occurred to me (later than I would wish to admit) that by the time John was writing this Gospel, Peter was probably already dead. If this is the case, then what is John’s purpose in writing about this incident? It is clearly not for Peter’s benefit. John tells us his reason for writing about this. It was to clear up the misconception some had that John would not die before the coming of our Lord. Jesus did not say that John would be alive at His return. He simply told Peter that if it was His will that he (Peter) die, and that John remain alive until His return, that was of no concern to Peter—it was none of his business. Death, like everything else, falls within the boundaries of our Lord’s sovereign control of all things. If death is God’s business, His *sovereign* business, then it is not Peter’s business to raise questions about John’s death.[213](https://bible.org/seriespage/what-thing-called-love-john-211-25#P5707_2306935)

Peter was guilty of giving too much attention to John, when our Lord had narrowed the focus of the discussion to Peter’s love, and Peter’s service. Jesus further indicated to Peter that he would glorify his Master by his death, a death that was similar to His death, a death by crucifixion. Peter had fixed his attention on John. From John’s words here, we know that others erred in the same way Peter had. It was a popular misconception that Jesus promised John that he would not die until His return. It was only that—a popular misconception—and John corrects it here.

As I have been studying this final chapter in John’s Gospel, I re-read 1 Peter and was impressed with the way [John 21](javascript:%7b%7d) and 1 Peter were so similar in their themes. Peter certainly “got the message” Jesus was giving him here. But I also had to remind myself that [John 21](javascript:%7b%7d) was not written by Peter; it was written by John! Then it struck me—if I didn’t constantly remind myself of the fact, I would tend to forget that John wrote the Gospel of John. John is writing this chapter, and he is even a character in this closing scene, but he is completely in the background. I believe this is just the way John wanted it.

In fact, this is the way it is throughout the Gospel of John. John does not refer to himself by name, but rather as “**the one Jesus loved**.” Notice that John never refers to himself as “the one who loved Jesus.” Of course he loved Jesus, but then he had heard Peter boast the same thing. Better to focus on the great, unfailing love our Lord has for us, than our feeble, fickle love for Him. Good decision, John! And keep in mind that of all the Gospel authors, only Matthew and John were one of the twelve. Only John was one of the inner three—Peter, James, and John—who witnessed some things to which the other nine were not privy. You would think, would you not, that John would be more than eager to write about some of those events in our Lord’s life, where he was one of the privileged few to be present, and to witness such great things? There was the transfiguration of our Lord, for example ([Matthew 17:1](javascript:%7b%7d); [Mark 9:2](javascript:%7b%7d); [Luke 9:29](javascript:%7b%7d)), the raising of the synagogue ruler’s dead daughter ([Mark 5:37](javascript:%7b%7d)), and the prayer of our Lord in the Garden of Gethsemane ([Mark 14:33](javascript:%7b%7d)). In each case, only the inner three were present, as stated in the Synoptic Gospels. And yet none of these incidents is even mentioned by John. John refuses to place himself in the spotlight. What an amazing man he is! Peter may be overly concerned about John (as he is), and so may those others who wrongly supposed that he would not die, but John himself is not so taken with himself. John keeps the focus on our Lord, and on the truths He spoke. Our eyes should not be on ourselves, but on Christ. Our focus should not be on what others are doing for Christ, or what God is doing for them. Our focus should be on Him, and on our love for Him, as shown by our loving service to His flock.

This is the “Great Commission” of John’s Gospel. It is certainly different from the Great Commission of Matthew’s Gospel. But when you stop to think about it, the point of both Gospels is the same. Matthew emphasizes the authority of our Lord, and the Lord’s command to make disciples. *John focuses on our love for the Lord, and the privilege we have to show our love for Him by caring for those He loves, in a way that is consistent with His sacrificial death at Calvary.*

One more thing should be said about the “**love**” which our Lord (and John) emphasizes in this closing chapter of John. We would do well to consider where John was when he penned this Gospel. The place of writing is not certain, but it is likely that it was Ephesus, which was apparently John’s home in his later years. Is it not interesting to think that when John writes his epistles, he places such emphasis on love? Is it not noteworthy that in the Book of Revelation, our Lord’s words to the church at Ephesus indicate that their great deficiency was that of love? And is it not noteworthy that when Paul wrote to Timothy, who was staying in Ephesus, he stated that the goal of his instruction was love ([1 Timothy 1:5](javascript:%7b%7d))? What a fitting way to end the Gospel of John, not by stressing the believer’s duty (which is very real, and very important), but by stressing the *believer’s love and sacrificial service*, the visible demonstration of that love.

### John’s Closing Words (21:24-25)

*24 This is the disciple who testifies about these things and has written these things, and we know that his testimony is true. 25 There are many other things that Jesus did. If every one of them were written down, I suppose the whole world would not have room for the books that would be written.*

This past few months, there has been a great deal of inquiry into the life and leadership of our President. The body of evidence against him is known as the “Starr Report.” Literally truckloads of documents and exhibits went into this report. Thousands of pages were written about this narrow window of time in the President’s life. How much more—and how much bigger and better—the “report” would be of all that our Lord did in His earthly ministry! When John tells his readers that “**the whole world would not have room for the books that could be written**,” he is hardly exaggerating. John has been very selective in what he has chosen to present as evidence in favor of his conclusion that Jesus is, indeed, the Son of God and the Savior of the world. And in his final words, John testifies that the words of this book are “**the gospel truth**.” It is not for lack of evidence that men are eternally lost. John has now set the evidence before his readers, and he urges each of us to draw the conclusions this evidence merits.

The verdict is clear. You should believe that Jesus is the promised Messiah—the Christ—and that by His sinless life and sacrificial death, your sins may be forgiven. And having believed the verdict, you should not only be overcome with His love for you, but you should be compelled by your love for Him, to serve Him as you shepherd His lambs. The evidence abounds; the verdict is clear. The question that remains is this: Given this evidence, how will you respond to Jesus Christ?

197 Such as the times when Jesus sent them out in pairs (e.g., [Mark 6:7](javascript:%7b%7d)ff.; [Luke 10:1](javascript:%7b%7d)ff.).

198 The word for “**fish**” here has no article, so it could be read, “**a fish**” as the NET Bible has rendered it. This need not be the case, however, and thus most translations do not render it “**a fish**,” as though there were only one fish—just enough for Jesus—but “**fish**”—enough for all the men to eat.

199 It is my understanding that [Matthew 4:18](javascript:%7b%7d)ff. describes an earlier incident, when these disciples left their boats for a short time. It would seem that in [Luke 5](javascript:%7b%7d) these men left their boats for good, or so it appeared, until the events of [John 21](javascript:%7b%7d).

200 I would not be so bold as to claim that I am a fisherman, but as I was growing up, my parents purchased an old fishing resort, which we ran for several years. I can tell you one thing: If you tell a fisherman where someone else made a big catch, he will almost certainly go try his luck in that same place.

201 I should say here that just after teaching this lesson, my wife and I were able to travel to Israel, where we spent one night in a cottage at the edge of the Sea of Galilee. There, from the shore, we watched the lights of the fishing boats as they worked in the darkness. And in the morning we watched them transferring their catch to shore. Some of the fish were as small as herring, while there were a few “large” fish in the range of ten pounds. When we crossed from the eastern shore to the west, we may well have been near the spot that Jesus was waiting for His disciples on shore.

202 The boat we saw unloading its small fish had only two large fish set aside on the seat.

203 William Hendriksen remarks, “Peter is the man of action. He generally acts before John does. John generally understands before Peter does.” William Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to John*, 2 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1953-1954), II, p. 479.

204 What could one do with 153 large fish? I can guess. First, you cook some up for eating for the next day or two. Then, you take what you know you won’t eat and sell it. This was how Peter and his partners made their living for a number of years.

205 Hendriksen, in an interesting footnote, summarizes some of the fanciful interpretations of the number 153, the exact count of the fish caught that morning: “Among the strange and, for the most part, allegorical interpretations of this item of information I have found the following: a. The fish were not counted until the shore had been reached, in order to teach us that the exact number of the elect remains unknown until they have reached the shore of heaven. b. The ancients counted one hundred fifty-three varieties of fish! c. There is here a veiled reference to [Matt. 13:47, 48](javascript:%7b%7d), and an indication that all kinds of people are going to be saved. d. The reference is to an important date in Church History, namely, 153 A.D. e. The total represents the sum of all the numbers from 1 to 17. Well, what of it? f. In Hebrew characters the numerical equivalent of Simon Iona is one hundred fifty-three. g. The number one hundred fifty-three represents 100 for the Gentiles, 50 for the Jews, and 3 for the Trinity.” Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to John*, II, pp. 483-484, fn. 300.

206 Could our Lord be picking up on what Peter had just done, as recorded in verse 7? “**Then the disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, ‘It is the Lord!’ So Simon Peter, when he heard that it was the Lord, tucked in his outer garment (for he had nothing on underneath it), and plunged into the sea.**” The proximity of these two statements in verses 7 and 18 could be coincidental, but I see fewer and fewer coincidences in the Bible.

207 D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1991), p. 678.

208 There is some discussion over what Jesus means here. The verse could be translated (and understood) in several ways. (1) “Peter, do you love me more than these fish, more than this boat and the nets, and the things which represent your life of a fisherman?” (2) “Peter, do you love Me more than you love these men?” (3) “Peter, do you love me more than these men do?” The NET Bible has opted for the third rendering, and I would agree.

209 “The circumstances must have reminded Peter of the scene of his denial. And if the circumstances as such did not remind him of this, what was about to happen was bound to do so. Note the following resemblances: 1. It was at a charcoal fire that Peter denied his Master (18:18). It is here at another charcoal fire (21:9) that he is asked to confess (his love for) his Master. 2. Three times Peter had denied his Master (18:17, 25, 27). Three times he must now own him as his Lord, whom he loves (21:15-17). 3. The prediction with reference to the denial had been introduced with the solemn double Amen (13:38; see on 1:51). The prediction which immediately followed Peter’s confession was introduced similarly (21:18). But it has been shown that the resemblance is even more pointed. In reverse order the same three ideas—1. following, 2. a cross, 3. denying—occur here in 21:15-19 as in 13:36-38.” William Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to John*, II , p. 486.

210 My capitalization of this word is not a mistake. Peter’s work (like that of all the disciples) is to carry on the Master’s work.

211 John has much more to say on this point in his first epistle. A search in my concordance program shows that “**love**” appears in John’s Gospel 57 times, far more often than in all the Synoptic Gospels combined (Matthew, 13; Mark, 6; Luke, 16 = 35 times). Love appears 46 times in the Epistle of First John.

212 D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1991), p. 679.

213 I’m sure I need to clarify. God’s sovereignty does not exclude our involvement. Salvation is God’s sovereign work, but we should surely be involved ([Romans 10:14-15](javascript:%7b%7d)). But one who is sovereign is not obliged to explain His actions, nor is it appropriate for the subject to challenge the sovereign by demanding an explanation (see [Romans 9:19-21](javascript:%7b%7d)).