

THE GOSPEL OF

JOHN

Fishing and
Forgiveness

INTRODUCTION

John 21:1-19

I grew up near the beach in a small fishing village in Florida. People who earn their living by fishing are some of the hardest working people I know. They are up before the sun and set out for the day's catch regardless of the weather. But if you ask them if they would rather do something different for a living, they will look at you and say, "Never in a million years." Fishermen love to fish.

Several of Jesus' followers were fishermen, including Peter. When he put down his nets to follow Jesus, he also gave up his lifestyle and his profession. That is why it is interesting that in John 21 we encounter him back out on the water, fishing. Some scholars believe that after Peter's three denials of Christ (Mark 14:66-72), he felt he had placed himself out of Jesus' inner circle and therefore retreated to his former occupation. What Peter certainly didn't expect was that Jesus would pursue him to talk about those courtyard denials.

The miraculous catch immediately got Peter's attention (John 21:6-7), but it was the charcoal fire burning that would have reminded Peter of his rejection of Christ (v. 9). The only other time where the word for charcoal fire is used was at the scene of Peter's denials (John 18:18). After their meal, Jesus turned to Peter. He asked Peter how much he truly loved Him (John 21:15a). Peter's declaration of loving the Lord three times did not erase his three denials just days before (vv. 15b-17). However, it did create an avenue for a deeper relationship with Jesus. With each question, Jesus was giving Peter another chance. While Peter the fisherman would finally retire, Peter the follower of Jesus would never turn back again.

No matter how many times you have turned from the Lord, He is always standing on the shore of your life calling you back to Himself. Are you ready to truly follow Him?

"But we never can prove the delights of His love, until all on the altar we lay; for the favor He shows, and for the joy He bestows, are for them who will trust and obey" (John H. Sammis).

Today we choose trust and obedience to You.¹

¹ Devotional entitled Fishing and Forgiveness by Dr. Chris Rappazini found @ <https://www.todayintheword.org/daily-devotional/fishing-and-forgiveness/>

OPEN IT

1. If you could go back in time to an earlier part of your life for a do over, what moment in your life would you choose and why?

READ IT

John 21:1-19

EXPLORE IT

2. What did seven disciples decide to do?
3. How successful were they?
4. What did Jesus ask them to do and what happened?
5. What did Jesus ask Peter to do and how many times did he ask?
6. What dire prediction did Jesus give to Peter?

APPLY IT

What's the point of including the fishing story right here? Consider the last few chapters. Chapters 13–17 describe the night preceding Jesus's death and focus on his final instructions to the disciples. Chapters 18–19 chronicle the arrest, betrayal, and crucifixion. Chapter 20 declares the wonderful truth of the resurrection. Now chapter 21 begins with a story about fishing.²

7. **Since John wrote his gospel long after the others he would have known that Matthew, Mark and Luke all finish their gospels with the giving of the great commission and the ascension of Jesus Christ? What reasons might John have had for finishing his gospel speaking of a fishing miracle and the restoration of Peter?**

Prior to our text, the last time we heard from Peter it wasn't pretty. (John 18:15–25) He had just denied knowing Jesus on three different occasions in one evening. Notice Peter says, after seeing Jesus, that he was going to go fishing. There is some debate on what Peter was doing here. Most commentators believe he was making decisions based on his failure, meaning he was returning to his old way of life. Why would he do that? This is the first time we've seen Peter going fishing by himself.

Commentators believe he was thinking, "Ministry with Jesus is over. I'm not going to be a pastor. I'm not going to be a missionary. Instead of worrying about doing that ministry thing, I'm just going to go do what I'm good at." Some of us have failed and think, "Because I've failed, God can't use me. There's nothing God can use me for in His Kingdom, so I'm just going to be the best whatever I'm good at." For me (Tim Badal, I would just go back to cooking pork chops and chicken—that's what I'm good at.) I would just leave it at that because I would be thinking that I'm obviously not good enough to be a servant of God. And Peter did just that.

8. ***What are some of the various things that make us think that once we have failed that God no longer wants to use us? Where might you be tempted to invest the time and energy that you once spent serving God?***

² Carter, Matt; Wredberg, Josh. Exalting Jesus in John (Christ-Centered Exposition Commentary) . B&H Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

9. ***Peter didn't fish alone, six others went fishing with him but they also followed Peter as he stepped away in shame. Who is watching and following you and what are they seeing in you whether in the good, bad, and ugly of life?***

Notice what the consequences are. John tells us Peter went fishing and the others went with him according to verse three. Now they were professional fishermen and what did they catch? Nothing. Greek is really important here. I want you to understand this. That word "nothing" literally means nothing. Zero. Nada. Nothing. There was nothing. I wonder if while they were fishing, they asked, "Man, we've really lost our touch. Things aren't working the way they used to. We used to really be good at this." They're not anymore. They caught nothing.

10. **These fishermen had forgotten what Jesus said in John 15:5 (I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing.) When have you seen this verse lived out in your own life and what keeps us from inviting Jesus into all that we do?**

What made it worse was that the disciples' area of failure was the area they had the most confidence in. They were professional fishermen! If there was anything they excelled at, it was fishing. Jesus used this area to teach the disciples a vital lesson: following him meant their confidence couldn't be in their own strength but must be in his sovereignty.³

11. Where do you find yourself relying more on your own efforts and strength? What does it look like to hand over this area from your hands into the hands of Jesus?

12. Once again we have seen Peter keeping his distance from Jesus and yet this time we see Jesus comes looking for Peter and the others. What does this tell us about our tendency as humans and what does it reveal about the heart of God?

³ Carter, Matt; Wredberg, Josh. *Exalting Jesus in John (Christ-Centered Exposition Commentary)*. B&H Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

In verse 12, we see that Jesus said to them, “Come and have breakfast.” Now how does this all fit? I want you to understand some of the connections you’re going to see. First, we know Peter denied Jesus three times;

We’ll talk about that in a few moments when we get to that part of the text. We also need to understand when Peter denied Jesus. Was it in the afternoon? Was it early evening? Was it later in the evening? Was it right before the morning arrived and the rooster crowed? When did Jesus meet them on the shore? Early afternoon? Late evening? Around midnight? Or at the break of dawn? It seems that Jesus was setting up a scenario to be a reminder to Peter. And Jesus was standing by a burning fire. At one point in Peter’s denial, he was standing near a burning fire and was asked, “Do you know Jesus?” Peter had replied no and now he sees Jesus next to a fire.

Now we can make more of that than we need to, but I think it’s a bit ironic that Jesus was setting up similar scenarios—at the break of day and near a fire. Three times Jesus asked Peter about his commitment and three times Jesus said He’s going to feed Peter. Now what’s so big about this issue of feeding him? In our culture, it means nothing. In Middle Eastern culture, it means the world. You do not eat with anybody until you have restored every element of a relationship.

13. Jesus shows great mercy in the smallest of gestures, the cooking of breakfast for his friends. How would you have felt if you were in Peter’s and the other disciples’ shoes? What are some of the small gestures of mercy and love that Christ shows you?

Peter had denied Jesus three times. It was no coincidence that Jesus asked Peter three times if he loved him and commissioned Peter three times to take care of God's people. Peter would have quickly made the association. Jesus asked Peter if he loved him more than the other disciples did. Before Jesus was arrested, Peter had said he did: "Even if all are made to stumble because of You, I will never be made to stumble" (Matthew 26:33 NKJV). He had not been shy then about declaring his love for Jesus; he wasn't shy now. In a straightforward manner, with no comparisons with the other disciples, he readily affirmed his love for Jesus. By the third time, he was hurt that Jesus asked him again, but he got the message.

So Jesus assigned him to feed—supply with the spiritual food of God's Word—and take care of his sheep. Peter's ministry would be feeding and shepherding God's children like Jesus had. His fishing career was over. Many Bible students have emphasized the different Greek words Jesus and Peter used for the word love, one meaning sacrificial love and the other, friendship love. Since John used both words as synonyms throughout the book, it's better not to make fine distinctions. Although the word believe is not used in this passage, the concept is. Jesus commanded those who believe in and love him to keep on following him.⁴

14. Put yourself in the place of Peter and Jesus asked you "Do you love me?" How would you answer and what would you use to prove your answer?

15. Jesus called Peter to take care of God's flock. In what unique ways has God gifted you to minister to those around you?

⁴ Johnson, Lin . The Book of John (The Smart Guide to the Bible Series) (pp. 274-275). Thomas Nelson. Kindle Edition.

Peter had just gotten his life straightened out when Jesus leaped to the topic of his death. He indicated how serious and important it was by beginning with the statement “Most assuredly I say to you.” In a picturesque way, he contrasted the end of Peter’s ministry with the beginning of it and went a step further to say how he would die. “Stretch out your hands” refers to being fastened to the horizontal beam of a cross. Peter had already died when John wrote this book. According to Jerome, one of the early church fathers, Peter was crucified upside down because he thought he was unworthy to die the same way as Jesus. Jesus ended his commission for Peter with the same words with which he had called him three years earlier: “Follow Me.” The form of the command in the Greek means to keep on following. It’s not a one time step but a lifetime walk. A lot had happened to Peter between those two commands, some of which John recorded in this book. But the command didn’t change, and Peter still had the rest of his life to obey it.⁵

16. What does it mean or look like to dedicate one’s life to following Jesus? How do we go about evaluating our process along the way?

⁵ Ibid