

Wednesday, April 2, 2025 | Deep Dive: The Gospel According to John | John 21:3-8

Vs. 3 – “Simon Peter saith unto them, I go a fishing. They say unto him, We also go with thee. They went farther, and entered into a ship immediately; and that night they caught nothing.”

Some commentators believe this was an innocent fishing expedition.¹ After all, the apostles needed to eat.² However, two factors speak against this interpretation: (1) this event occurred at "night," and (2) the disciples "caught nothing." Admittedly, nighttime fishing on the Sea of Galilee was a standard practice for commercial fishermen at the time and remains so today.³ Bottom trawling (the type of fishing technique used here) was more effective during the evening since fish are less active at this time and, thus, are more easily entangled by a net. Also, catching fish at night ensured they'd be at peak freshness for the morning market.⁴ But the light/darkness motif in John's account (cf. 1:4-5; 3:2, 19-21; 8:12; 9:4-5; 11:9-10; 12:35-36, 46; 13:30) indicates what would normally be a *benign* observation has a *negative* connotation.⁵ Not unlike how we might say, "nothing good happens after midnight," John shows that generally speaking, night is the preferred time for misconduct.⁶

Moreover, it is no mere passing comment that the disciples “caught nothing.” Such failure implies this fishing trip wasn't as innocent as some would like to believe. After all, with the Lord, the apostles were told they'd do “greater works” than those done by even Jesus himself (14:12). But without the Lord, they would accomplish “nothing” (15:5). So, a failure to catch any fish suggests that the apostles were not abiding in the vine. In fact, it is only when they obey the Lord's instructions that they succeed (cf. vs. 6), indicating that everything they did before that moment was, to some extent, disobedience.

This is not to say the apostles were on the brink of apostasy. As mentioned before, the reason they were even in Galilee was because they were obeying Jesus' command to do so (cf. Matt. 26:32; 28:10), and, lest we forget, these men had seen, talked, touched, and ate with the resurrected Lord. Even without the Holy Spirit, it is difficult to believe they were on the verge of abandoning their faith.

¹ Keener (2003), 2:1227, asserts that the disciples were doing nothing more nefarious than taking advantage of some downtime.

² Beasley-Murray (1999), p. 399.

³ Morris (1995), p. 761.

⁴ Köstenberger (2008), p. 589.

⁵ Klink (2016), p. 896.

⁶ Jesus' betrayal and his questioning by Annas and Caiaphas all occurred in the middle of the night.

Nevertheless, though it is wrong to totally condemn these men for fishing, ignoring the warning signs is just as wrong given the above reasons.⁷ As it stands, the apostles are at risk of lapsing back into their old way of life. A simple fishing trip had the potential to become a significant stumbling block. And often, those things that are innocent, innocuous, or inoffensive interfere the most with one's Christian development. This is why, Susanna Wesley, mother of 19 kids, two of whom became the founders of Methodism, said, "Whatever weakens your reason, impairs the tenderness of your conscience, obscures your sense of God, takes off your relish for spiritual things, whatever increases the authority of the body over the mind, that thing is sin to you, however innocent it may seem in itself."

Vs. 4 – John tells us that "when the morning was now come, Jesus stood on the shore: but the disciples knew not that it was Jesus." The word translated as "morning" is **πρωϊα** (*prōia*), and it refers to the "early part of the daylight period,"⁸ indicating it was right at the break of dawn. Failing to recognize the Lord is a common feature of resurrection appearances (cf. 20:14-15; Lu. 24:16). Jesus often chose to veil himself for some unknown reason. But given the distance the apostles were from the shore (cf. vs. 8) and the low light during the early morning, visibility might've been impaired. It's just as likely that it was impossible to discern any distinguishable features.

Vs. 5-6 – "Then Jesus saith unto them, Children, have ye any meat?" The Greek term translated as "Children" is **παιδία** (*paidia*), and while it can refer to kids (cf. 4:49; 16:21; Matt. 14:21; Mar. 5:39; Lu. 18:16), it's usage here is more like the English "lads," Irish "boys," or the American "guys."⁹ To be sure, the Lord knew the answer to his own question. In fact, his use of the *negative* particle **μή** (*mē*) indicates that he expected a *negative* answer.¹⁰ Thus, the Lord is not surprised when the apostles answer him, saying, "No." Does such a succinct response indicate that these men were low-spirited and dejected? Perhaps.

Jesus says, "Cast the net on the right side of the ship, and ye shall find." Of the two, the "right side," or, to use the proper nautical term, the "starboard side," would've been considered to be the more advantageous or most favorable (cf. Gen. 48:13-14; Eccl. 10:2; Isa. 41:13; 89:13; Matt. 25:33). That the disciples heed this advice has led some to assume that they already recognized Jesus. But this not only ignores verse 4, it also renders verse 7 nonsensical. Jesus was still

⁷ Carson (1991), p. 669, "But if Peter and his friends have neither apostatized nor sunk into despair, this fishing expedition and the dialogue that ensues do not read like the lives of men on a Spirit-empowered mission. It is impossible to imagine any of this taking place in Acts, *after Pentecost* [author's emphasis]."

⁸ BDAG, p. 892.

⁹ Köstenberger (2008), p. 590; Klink (2016), p. 897, states that *paidia* should be linked with the *teknon* of 1:12, indicating the apostles' new status as "children" of God.

¹⁰ Morris (1995), p. 761, "You haven't caught any fish, have you?"

incognito at this point. So, why did they take the advice? Anyone who has ever been fishing will know the answer. Like all fishermen desperate to salvage their efforts, the disciples did not need to verify the identity of the person giving them advice to follow it. Even accepting the fact that they had to be wearied from fishing all night, and so might be less inclined to keep going, they had little to lose and a lot to gain by giving it a try one last time before quitting for the day.

John tells us that he and his friends “cast” again and end up catching a “multitude of fishes,” so many, that they “were not able to draw” their net from the water. This scene is reminiscent of Luke 5:4-11, in which the Lord called Peter, Andrew, James, and John to be his disciples. And just as they failed to catch a single fish back then, so they failed again here. But just as Jesus bid them cast again, so he does once more. And just as the men obeyed and caught so many fish that they nearly sank two boats, so they obey again, catching so many fish they could not haul their nets aboard. Thus, the initial conflict in this passage isn't an absence of fish, but an absence of the Lord.¹¹ *Without* Jesus, the disciples were novice fishermen, only weekend warriors with a few fishy tales but no fish to show. But *with* the Lord, they became professional anglers, specialists with a 100% success rate. As Köstenberger so aptly points out, “The disciples never catch a fish in any of the Gospels without Jesus’ help.”¹²

Vs. 7 – As we’ve often noted, the “disciple whom Jesus loved” refers to John, hence why he is called John the Beloved (*see notes 13:23-25*). Just as John realized the implications of the empty tomb (cf. 20:8), he recognized the implications of this miraculous catch. He turns to Peter and says, “It is the Lord,” using the title for Jesus, which indicates his sovereignty. John knew that only the Son of God could wield such authority and/or exemplify such knowledge.

If quick-thinking is characteristic of John, then swift-acting is characteristic of Peter. John says, “When Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he girt his fisher's coat unto him, (for he was naked) and cast himself into the sea.” Just as the lead apostle was the first to start toward the tomb (cf. 20:3-4), he’ll be the first to start towards the shore. And unlike before, John won’t beat Peter this time.

That Peter had to “girt his fisher's coat...for he was naked” doesn't mean that he was nude, even though, technically, that is the literal translation of the Greek term **γυμνός** (*gymnó*) (cf. Mar. 14:51-52). This is apparent for two reasons. First, one might suppose that, in the heat of the day, fishermen would want to discard as much clothing as possible, but the disciples had been fishing during the night, so it is highly unlikely that they would've been in a complete state of undress, especially since they were so close to the shore (cf. vs. 9). It is far more likely that to

¹¹ Klink (2016), p. 897.

¹² Köstenberger (2008), p. 590.

be “naked” in this context means to be “stripped for work.”¹³ After all, men wore both an *under* and *outer* garment; the so-called “fisher's coat” must refer to the latter, implying that Peter still wore the former.

Second, “girt” does not mean clothed. If so, John would’ve used a word like ἱματίζω (*himatízō*) (cf. Lu. 8:35). To “girt” means that he tied or tucked the loose ends of his undergarment together.¹⁴ This action would’ve freed up his legs, making it easier to swim. Jesus did the same thing with a serving towel when he washed the disciples’ feet (cf. 13:4-5).¹⁵ Additionally, fully dressing oneself before jumping into the sea would’ve been counterproductive. It would have hampered Peter's attempts to swim.

Vs. 8 – While Peter headed for the shoreline, “the other disciples” followed “in a little ship.” Doubtless, the impression we're left with is one of reckless abandonment. Peter led his friend onto that ship, leaving them holding the bag or, in this case, “dragging the net with fishes.” Thankfully, the ship wasn’t “far from land,” being only about “two hundred cubits.” One cubit is roughly equal to about half a meter. This means Peter might be the first recorded person to swim the 100m freestyle.

Interestingly, after this, we never again see these men fishing in the conventional sense of the term. Instead, they become “fishers of men,” as the Lord himself had foretold three years prior (cf. Mat. 4:19). And as great as this particular catch will be (cf. vs. 11), it pales in comparison to the one they get later (cf. Ac. 2:41; 4:4).

¹³ Morris (1995), p. 763.

¹⁴ Carson (1991), p. 671.

¹⁵ The same verb, διαζώννυμι (*diazōnnymi*), is used in both passages to describe the same action.

VIDEO DESCRIPTION

Deep Dive: The Gospel of John | Week 100 | John 21:3-8

SPEAKER: Ben Hyrne, Pastor

In tonight's passage, Peter goes for a swim. We're told the distance was about "two hundred cubits." A cubit is roughly half a meter. This means the Lead Apostle might be the first recorded person to swim the 100m freestyle. One wonders how he'd measure up to Michael Phelps.

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