

Wednesday, April 9, 2025 | Deep Dive: The Gospel According to John | John 21:9-14

Vs. 9 – The apostles were met with a peculiar site when they “were come to land.” John tells us that “a fire of coals” was already kindled, and there was some “fish and bread,” roasting over the campfire. Interestingly, both Jesus' first miracle—i.e., water to wine (cf. 2:1-12)—and his last miracle deal with food. But more telling is that this provision of fish and bread recalls the feeding of the five thousand (cf. 6:1-14). This simple but profound meal is a veritable calling card for Jesus Christ.

In Greek, the terms “fish” and “bread” are singular, but as in English, they can be used in a collective sense even in their solitary form (cf. vs. 13).¹ So, it is possible there was more than a single fish and/or loaf of bread roasting on the fire. Regardless, even a modest meal would've been greatly appreciated by these wearied fishermen. The disciples' satisfaction from this meal, provided by the Lord, is a testament to the joy that comes from God's provision. If hospitality is a trait of a healthy Christian (cf. Rom. 12:13; 1 Tim. 5:10; 1 Pet. 4:9; Heb. 13:2), then it should be no surprise that the Lord was a gracious host.

But the point here is not how much food was needed to feed eight grown men; it's the fact that there was food at all. Not including the miraculous catch, the Lord had already provided a hot breakfast. But even factoring in all those fish, the credit still goes to Jesus. These men would've left that morning emptyhanded and hungry if not for him. Thus, the Lord met their needs. This gives new meaning to the fourth petition of the Lord's Prayer: “Give us this day our daily bread” (Matt. 6:11). The disciples sat at a fire made by Jesus' hand and only ate food that he himself had provided for them. Every fish caught, every grain harvested, every profit earned, and every soul won is the Lord's (cf. 1 Cor. 3:6-9). We have only what God has given to us (cf. 3:27).

The Greek word translated as “fire of coals” is the same term used for the fire around which most of Peter's denials took place (cf. 18:18).² This campfire might've been provided out of necessity; they'd need a way to cook the fish. However, given that this scene parallels 18:17-27, it is far more likely that Jesus has recreated a key prop from Peter's denial.³ As Jesus' three-fold questioning will make explicit, this fire was intended to recall another more inauspicious one.

Vs. 10-11 – That “Simon Peter” is the only disciple mentioned does not mean he was the only one commanded to “Bring of the fish which ye have now caught.”⁴ The command was “unto

¹ Carson (1991), p. 672; for a collective sense of the singular “bread,” see 6:23, 31; Mat. 15:2; Lu. 4:3; 11:3.

² ἀνθρακιά (*anthrakíá*)

³ Köstenberger (2004), p. 592; Carson (1991), p. 671, concedes this point, though he still calls such a connection “very subtle.”

⁴ Contra. Carson (1991), p. 672. Rightly, Klink (2016), p. 900.

them,” referring to all seven apostles. John only mentions Peter because he and Jesus are the primary characters in this passage.

John tells us that when they “drew the net to land,” it was “full of great fishes.” Notice that John does not say “many fishes” but “great fishes.” He uses the Greek word μέγας (*megas*), and its primary usage is not *numerical* but *dimensional* (cf. Mar. 4:32; 14:15; 16:4; Lu. 12:18; 22:12).⁵ In fact, the English word “mega” comes from this Greek term. These fish weren’t minnows; they had some weight to them (cf. Matt. 27:60; Rev. 11:19). And John says that, in total, they caught “an hundred and fifty and three” fish. That’s enough for each man to have 19 with 1 to spare.

Forty-five fish species can be found in the “inland waters of Palestine.”⁶ It is impossible to know the exact type of fish caught; it was likely a combination of various species. However, tilapia is one of the most commonly found fish in this area. In fact, mango tilapia, aka “St. Peter’s Fish,” is regularly caught on the Sea of Galilee today and has an average weight of 3.5 lbs.⁷ Assuming Peter caught the very fish that now bears his name, this catch could’ve weighed upwards of 535lbs! Hence why the Beloved Apostle says, “And for all there were so many, yet was not the net broken.” Such a weight should’ve destroyed the fishing nets (cf. Lu. 5:6), but it didn’t. Thus, this miracle incorporates three important elements: quantity, quality, and custody. These fish were not just many and healthy, but more importantly, they did not get away.

Attempts have been made to find symbolic significance in the number of fish. Using inaccurate zoological evidence, a fourth-century church father, Jerome, claimed that the Sea of Galilee had precisely 153 fish species. By catching exactly that many, the disciples essentially caught every known fish. As such, Jerome saw an allusion to Ezekiel 47:6-12 wherein he equated the 153 fish with “the fish of the great sea, exceeding many.” He reasoned that just as Jesus is Lord over all the fish, he is Lord over every creature. And just as he brought every kind of fish into the disciples’ boat, he would bring people of every nation, tribe, and tongue into the kingdom. However, this theory falls apart when one begins questioning how these 153 fish types were cataloged. Also, some sources claimed 74 fish species, while others said 104 if you included those with “hard coverings.”⁸

⁵ BDAG, p. 623.

⁶ “Animals of the Bible: Fish,” *Nelson’s Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, New and Enhanced Edition, Ronald F. Youngblood, Editor, (Nashville, TN; Thomas Nelson, 2014), p. 58.

⁷ Wiki3.5 lbs contributors, “Sea of Galilee,” Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Sea_of_Galilee&oldid=1265404061 [accessed April 9, 2025].

⁸ Keener (2003), 2:1232.

Using a mathematical approach, some early Christians thought 153 represented two key theological truths. Origen claimed it symbolized the Trinity. He came to this conclusion because “it can be divided into three parts of which to themselves are “three:” $153 = (50 \times 3) + 3$.”⁹ Similarly, Augustine noted that 153 is the 17th triangular number.¹⁰ Since $17 = 10 + 7$, Augustine saw a reference to the Ten Commandments and the seven-fold Spirit of God in Rev. 1:4.¹¹ However, such a focus is influenced more by mathematical equations than Johannine literature. It reads far too much into the text rather than allowing it to speak for itself. Nowhere does John indicate that 153 represents such things.

But by far and away, the most complicated explanation of 153 is based on “gematria.” Gematria takes the Hebrew alphabet and gives each letter a unique numerical value. According to this interpretative technique, 153 translates to “children of God.”¹² However, such an interpretation ignores that gematria is a practice mainly of fifth-century Kabbalists, which would've been utterly alien to John's first-century context.¹³ Also, it assumes John's audience was not only extremely familiar with Hebrew, an improbability given the many times he's transliterated Hebrew terms (cf. 1:38, 41; 5:2; 9:7; 19:13, 17) but they must've also been well-versed in a subset of the language that is, at best, a niche concentration.¹⁴

As always, the simplest explanation is best. The mention of 153 fish is evidence that John was present when these fish were counted. Like the reference to the blood and water pouring from Jesus' side (*see notes 19:32-34*), this number indicates that this account is based on firsthand eyewitness testimony. As a seasoned fisherman whose trade often required him to divvy up the day's catch between his colleagues, John was well-accustomed to counting fish. That he includes the number here is his way of bringing further credibility to his writing and nothing more.

Vs. 12-13 – “Jesus saith unto them, Come and dine.” Eating two meals a day was customary, with the first being consumed before starting work.¹⁵ The Greek term translated as “dine” is **ἀριστήσατε** (*aristayate*), and it refers to “breakfast.”¹⁶ The evening meal was called **δεῖπνον** (*deipnon*), often translated as “supper” (cf. 12:2; 13:2).

⁹ Klink (2016), p. 902.

¹⁰ Carson (1991), p. 673.

¹¹ Keener (2003), 2:1232.

¹² *Ibid.*, 2:1231.

¹³ The Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica, “gematria.” *Encyclopedia Britannica*, November 23, 2024, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/gematria> [accessed April 9, 2025].

¹⁴ Carson (1991), p. 673.

¹⁵ Morris (1995), p. 766.

¹⁶ Keener (2003), 2:1230.

At this point, John says something peculiar. He tells us that none of the apostles "*durst* [emphasis added] ask him, Who art thou? knowing that it was the Lord." "Durst" is an archaic form of the word "dare." John isn't only saying they didn't need to confirm Jesus' identity because they already knew it was him. That is true. But there's more going on here. John is also saying that they *wanted* to confirm Jesus' identity, but considering all that has happened, they dared not do such a thing. Why? Perhaps asking would've been discourteous. But more likely, this reticence speaks to how, even now, the disciples were still trying to come to grips with the resurrection. They had every indication that what they saw was real, but they still had difficulty fully embracing the truth. They still desired *verbal* confirmation from Jesus that he was indeed who he appeared to be.

John describes the Lord as serving the disciples rather than the other way around: "Jesus then cometh, and taketh bread, and giveth them, and fish likewise." Were the apostles so awestruck that they didn't know what to do or how to behave? And so, the Lord had to take the lead? Maybe. Regardless, just as Jesus had once washed their feet (cf. 13:1-11), he served them a meal. And despite what some will claim, given the absence of wine and the presence of fish, this passage isn't depicting the Lord's Supper. As mentioned before, Jesus' hospitality is on full display. Indeed, "the Son of man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many" (Mar. 10:45). The Lord meets both the spiritual and physical needs of his sheep (cf. Matt. 6:25-34).

Vs. 14 – "This is now the third time that Jesus shewed himself to his disciples, after that he was risen from the dead." When John says "the third time," he does not mean that this is Jesus' third-ever appearance. He's enumerating only those appearances wherein the apostles were present. Case in point, John does not include Jesus appearing before Mary Magdalene (cf. 20:11-18) in his count because she was not an apostle.

Specifying the chronological order and/or the exact number of Jesus' resurrection appearances is impossible. Luke tells us that Jesus "shewed himself alive after his passion by *many* [emphasis added] infallible proofs, being seen of them forty days" (Act. 1:3). In other words, the Lord appeared over the course of five and half weeks. Given the considerable timeframe and the varied nature of these appearances, it makes sense that an itemized list cannot be ascertained.

Yet, while it is doubtful that we know about all the appearances, we do know quite a few. Admittedly, it depends on how you count them. Still, there are at least 13 total appearances if you count Paul's conversion: (1) the women at the tomb (cf. Matt. 28:8-10), (2) Mary Magdalene (cf. Jn. 20:11-18), (3) the two disciples on the road to Emmaus (cf. Lu. 24:13-34), (4) Peter in Jerusalem (cf. 1 Cor. 15:5), (5) the apostles without Thomas (cf. Jn. 20:19-23), (6) the

apostles with Thomas (cf. Jn. 20:26-29), (7) the seven apostles fishing in Galilee (cf. Jn. 21:1-2), (8) the eleven apostles in Galilee (cf. Matt. 28:16), (9) the appearance before “five hundred” people (cf. 1 Cor. 15:6), (10) James the Lord’s brother (cf. 1 Cor. 15:7a), (11) the “all the apostles” appearance (cf. 1 Cor. 15:7b), (12) the ascension (cf. Ac. 1:6-9), and, lastly, (13) Paul’s conversion (cf. Ac. 9).

VIDEO DESCRIPTION

Deep Dive: The Gospel of John | Week 101 | John 21:9-14

SPEAKER: Ben Hyrne, Pastor

A fish story is synonymous with fantasy. Often, fishermen return from a morning on the water with a tall tale about how they almost bagged some massive fish. As the saying goes, “It’s always the biggest ones that get away.” In other words, if there’s no fish to show, you can make it as large as you want.

Today's passage is a fish story, but this is no fantasy. Seven men will catch 153 fish with a single cast of the net. And aside from one possible contender (cf. Lu. 5:1-11), it is the greatest fishing account ever recorded. Not just because of the quantity and size (they were “mega” fish) but also because of how these fish were caught. When Jesus is your guide, you can’t help but win.

Pastor's manuscript can be found here:

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