

A Refresher Course . . . Fishing 101

John 21:1-14

Introduction

After Jesus Christ rose from the dead, He appeared at least six different times in or around Jerusalem. Afterwards, the disciples returned to Galilee, still uncertain, still unsure about what their future would be.

Just think about what they had experienced over the last few weeks:

- the triumphal entry of their beloved Teacher and the high hopes that Rome would be overthrown and the Kingdom established;
- a supper in an upper room, filled with mysterious actions and words;
- the surprise of a late night garden arrest;
- the betrayal by one of their closest friends;
- the trial and crucifixion of Jesus;
- the burial of Jesus;
- the resurrection and appearance to them of Jesus, saying more mysterious words.

What are they to do now? They did as they were told and returned to Galilee – and waited. As they waited, their uncertainty and confusion must have mounted. What would happen next? So, they did what they knew how to do best – eight of them packed their gear and went fishing!

Observations of The Risen Lord and New Testament Disciples

This leads me to the first observation about the verses we will study today. Turn to John's gospel, chapter 21, verses 1 through 14.

The risen Lord is still using simple places to teach special lessons.

1. Observation number one is that the risen Lord is still using simple places to teach special lessons.

Look at verses 1 through 3a.

After these things Jesus manifested Himself again to the disciples at the Sea of Tiberias, and He manifested Himself in this way. There were together Simon Peter and Thomas called Didymus, . . .

(which means twin),

. . . and Nathanael of Cana in Galilee, and the sons of Zebedee, . . .

(who are James and John),

. . . and two others of His disciples. Simon Peter said to them, "I am going fishing." They said to him, "We will also come with you."

I love this – Peter is tired of sitting around; he is restless. Besides, he has not felt the rough nets in his hands or the sea on his face in quite some time. So, he says, "I'm going fishing."

The other men say, "That sounds like a terrific idea! We'll come too."

So, it will be in something that is almost as old as man – fishing, on the waves of their beloved sea – where they will learn some incredible lessons.

They are using cast nets that are thrown from the boat in a circular fashion. Complete cast nets have been found in Egyptian tombs dating back two thousand years before the time of Christ. There is nothing unusual about this setting – just eight fellows fishing!

For you, the ordinary might be in the kitchen or laundry room; it might be in the corporate board room or at an easel; it might be behind a cash register or a lectern; it might be in front of a computer terminal. It is in the grind of the everyday world where God reveals His glory.

What is your world? What is typical for you? What is your profession or craft? Where has God assigned you? It will be in that classroom where He will teach you the most. The ordinary duties of life become the chalkboard upon which He draws the most profound lessons.

And Jesus is about to teach His disciples some profound truths that they will never forget.

The risen Lord is still taking us to our places of greatest confidence to teach us our need for total dependence.

2. Observation number two is that the risen Lord is still taking us to our places of greatest confidence to teach us our need for total dependence.

Notice the last part of verse 3.

They went out, and got into the boat; and that night they caught nothing.

Now, that is a loaded statement. I have only fished two or three times in my life – verse 3 will tell you why. However, I have read of some, like Thomas Edison and Harvey Firestone, who would go fishing without any bait. They had no intention nor desire to catch anything. For them, it was a diversion; a time to think.

I personally do not think Simon Peter was like Thomas Edison. He was not out there to think, he was out there to catch fish – and he was good at it too. He knew every fishing spot on that sea; he had traveled every square inch of it a thousand times. So, for the Bible to record, “. . . and . . . they caught

nothing,” is as much to say, “they were frustrated, tired, and hungry.”

Where do you feel the most confident? Where is your place of greatest strength?

There is no such thing in the kingdom of God as a “self-made” man or woman. This is not an easy lesson for a society in which a “self-made” man or a “self-made” woman is idealized.

A survey was taken, some time ago, among preschool teachers, administrators, parents, and child development specialists. They were asked what the most important thing for a child to learn in preschool was. “Self-reliance and self-confidence” won the day, with thirty-four percent. The percentage who said, “sympathy, empathy, and concern for others,” was just five percent.

There is hardly anything more destructive to the believer’s growth than self-confidence, self-assurance.

So, look at the disciples – they are in the area in which they know the most, where they have seen the most, and in which they are experts at their craft. They are self-assured, confident. Yet, it is here that Jesus teaches them that it is possible to fail in your sphere of expertise. The other side of that lesson is, “If you follow Me into something you have never done before, it is possible to succeed.”

A special program, preceding the 1988 Winter Olympics, featured blind skiers being trained for slalom skiing – impossible as that sounds. Paired with sighted skiers, the blind skiers were taught, on the flats, how to make right and left turns. When that was mastered, they were taken to the slalom slope, where their sighted partners skied beside them shouting, “Left!” and “Right!” As they obeyed the commands, they were able to negotiate the course and cross the finish line, depending solely on the sighted skier’s word. It was either complete trust or complete failure.

I could follow this observation with another one like it.

New Testament disciples are still learning that serving in the energy of the flesh produces empty nets.

3. Observation number three is that New Testament disciples are still learning that serving in the energy of the flesh produces empty nets.

It is at this time that Jesus makes His post-resurrection appearance. Look at verses 4 and 5a.

But when the day was now breaking, Jesus stood on the beach; yet the disciples did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus therefore said to them, “Children, you do not have any fish, do you?”

Now, stop here. This is practically the worst question that can be asked of a fisherman who has spent all night catching mosquito bites, tin cans, and rubber boots – “You didn’t catch anything, did you?”

Now continue to verse 5b for their answer.

They answered Him, “No.”

Their answer implies that they are through trying! They did not say, “We will, after one more try . . .”, or “Not yet . . .”, but simply, “No.”

The Lord is not asking questions because He does not know the answer. He is bringing them to admit failure.

God has asked many questions. His first question, in Genesis, chapter 3, verse 9b, was to Adam, . . . “Where are you?”

Is that because He did not know where Adam and Eve were hiding? “Let’s see, are they behind the maple tree or the azaleas?”

Then, in Genesis, chapter 4, verse 9a, God asked Cain, . . . “Where is Abel your brother?”

God asks questions to force us to face the situation.

Many times our efforts at work, in relationships, with parenting, in a ministry leave us with “empty nets”. I am convinced the Lord allows us to experience a lack of productivity, frustration, and even failure to bring us closer to the truth that dependency upon Him is not optional, it is essential.

Now notice verse 6.

And He said to them, “Cast the net on the right-hand side of the boat, and you will find a catch.” They cast therefore, and then they were not able to haul it in because of the great number of fish.

It seems like such a silly command, “Throw the nets over the right side.”

The point is simple, “If you follow My direction, there will be effectiveness, fruitfulness, and productivity. If you disregard My direction, that means one thing – an empty net.”

“But, Lord, why the right side of the boat, You can bring the fish to the left side, can’t you? Besides, I’m already facing in that direction and my feet are already firmly planted. Why make this command to cast in the other direction?”

The critical point is that Christ made the command – not that it made human sense; not that it made life easy; not that it followed the normal pattern of fishing – but that Jesus Christ said it.

How often, like these disciples, in our own wisdom, have we been fishing on the wrong side, making our own decisions, trying to get things done in our own strength and wisdom, and saying to ourselves, “I’m going fishing, on my own.”?

You might be struggling right now with the direction that the risen Lord has given to you. You know what His command is; you know He is asking you to make a change – to move from familiar territory into uncharted waters; to throw your net in another direction – but, your heart simply says, “No!”

“Men, stop throwing your net over the left side of the boat. I want you to change your target area – throw the nets over the right side.”

So, disciples, then and now, can continue to throw the net the way they want. We can say, “Lord, I’m used to serving You in this way. I know what I’m doing. I’m a left side of the boat fisherman. This is the way I learned to fish. Just bless what I know how to do!”

I was trained that churches grow by doing certain things. It was ingrained into me that certain methods had to be used. I served on several church staffs part-time, while attending college and seminary, that experienced first time visitors only after there had been a concerted effort to canvas the neighborhoods. Mailing things was okay, and newspaper advertisements were acceptable, but, “knocking on doors is God’s method for church growth.”

I was also trained to be in the home of everyone who visited the church as soon as possible. A good pastor spends time in everyone’s living room.

So, thirty days before our church held its first service, in the heat of August, I walked the entire neighborhood, where we had just moved, and knocked on every door. I wrote down names and notes about those who seemed interested and then, followed up with a personal letter. I would see to it that someone was at that first service. And, at our first service, twenty eight people came – not one of them were from

my neighborhood! To this day, no one has come from that neighborhood! Maybe it is because they all met me! It is as if the Lord said to me, very early on, "I'm going to build this church and it will be through totally different methods than you've expected. You can work out of the left side of the boat all you want, but the fish are on the right side."

Then, I had another problem – I had all these people to visit. I was out every night showing up at people's doors unannounced. The standard line of pastoral reasoning is, "If you want people to come back, you have to visit them within a week of their first visit."

This is what I was trained to do. I love being with people, and this was God's method of keeping people coming back to church, right?! The problem was, by the end of the first two Sundays, twenty families had visited Colonial – I was hardly ever home.

Not long after that, I knocked on the door of a man's home one evening. He was in his mid-fifties and was an executive with a major company in our area. Later, I would disciple this man for nearly a year. He answered the door and I told him how happy I was that he had visited the church and that I would like to visit with him for awhile. He invited me in and then, as we were halfway through the living room, he turned, looked at me, and said, "Do you mind if I ask you a question?"

I said "Sure!"

He said, "Do preachers ever make appointments, or do they always just show up?"

I had never learned that in seminary! I had to relearn fishing.

Now, I am not suggesting that everyone in ministry has to do things my way – that would be just as wrong. But for me, for this church, the Lord made it very clear early on, "Here is how I want you to throw your net – don't spend all your time in living rooms, spend time in the kitchen, preparing a meal for hungry people. If they come back, it will be because I want them to, when I want them to, for the reasons I want them to return."

What about other areas? Many of us might be trying to raise children by simply copying someone else's plan, or book, or system. God may want you to do things differently; unique to your family.

Some of you might be treating your marital relationship with the same harmful patterns that you saw growing up. Adopting biblical patterns for your

relationships may involve breaking deep rooted patterns that have been passed through your family for generations.

Some of you might be convinced that God would never use you in an area of service where you have no experience whatsoever, so you continue to force yourself forward in an area that continues to yield a lack of fulfillment; empty nets.

He wants you to head to the right side of the boat and leave the left side.

Following the risen Lord will often move us from the familiar to the unfamiliar.

4. That leads me to observation number four that following the risen Lord will often move us from the familiar to the unfamiliar.

This fishing expedition, in John, chapter 21, is a refresher course, a reminder of something that occurred years earlier. Luke, chapter 5, records another similar incident. On their first fishing trip, under the direction of Jesus, Luke tells us, in verses 4 through 6,

And when He had finished speaking, He said to Simon, "Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch." And Simon answered and said, "Master, we worked hard all night and caught nothing, but at Your bidding I will let down the nets." And when they had done this, they enclosed a great quantity of fish; and their nets began to break

Skip to verses 8 and 9.

But when Simon Peter saw that, he fell down at Jesus' feet, saying, "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord!" For amazement had seized him and all his companions because of the catch of fish which they had taken

Now notice the middle part of verse 10.

And Jesus said to Simon, "Do not fear, from now on you will be catching men."

What fascinates me is that the Lord precedes His commission, His life changing challenge to Peter to become a fisher of men, with the words, "Don't be afraid."

Why? Because unfamiliar territory is always frightening.

These men knew a lot about fish – but fishing for fish is a lot different than fishing for people! For one thing, all the work in lakeside fishing is in the fishing – once you have caught your catfish or bass, you are finished – and the fish dies. But with people, when they are caught by the truth, they do not die, they come to life – and your work has just begun.

Jesus Christ says to these men, established in their careers, rooted in their families, “Come away with Me – from the familiar to something totally unfamiliar – I want you to catch men.”

By the way, the term, “fishing for men,” was not invented by Jesus – it had been used for years by Greek and Roman teachers. To be a “fisher of men,” in that day, meant to seek to persuade men and “catch” them with the truth – whatever that particular teacher’s brand of truth was.

So, in effect, Jesus is telling these men to trade in their fishing poles for kingdom truth. Their bait will no longer be earthly worms but heavenly wisdom. While they were used to working with their strong muscles, Jesus now wants them to work with their mouths – declaring the gospel truth of the risen Lord! *What a change!*

I like the words of Kent Hughes, who says,

The horizon of these fishermen’s lives was bound by the margins of Galilee. Once in a while they went down to Jerusalem for a festival. But, by and large, they knew little more than the deck of their boat, the currents of the lake, and the handful of people in the marketplace . . . then Christ came and how their world changed! John would go to Ephesus, Thomas to India, Andrew would go to the borders of Russia.

Men whose lives had been wrapped up in the small affairs of mending nets and catching fish, were now moved to reach the world.

Are you willing for God to expand your world?

New Testament disciples are still discovering special surprises behind doorways labeled “obedience”.

5. Observation number five is that New Testament disciples are still discovering special surprises behind doorways labeled “obedience”.

Go back to John’s gospel, chapter 21.

It was possible for the disciples to say, “No,” and row into shore. I am convinced that the Lord would still have fed them and taught them the significance of empty nets and their need to obey Him, but they would have missed a wonderful miracle.

Have you ever been surprised by God? When you answer His call to become fishers of men – get ready – you begin a life of unpredictable events. There is no game plan and you have no idea what that may mean for tomorrow. You begin to live with a sense of anticipation, “What is God going to do next?”

Frankly, that is one of the reasons many people stay close to shore. But, for those of you who are already fishers, let me encourage you with the next observation.

New Testament disciples are still recognizing that the Lord’s direction will always be accompanied by His provision.

6. Observation number six is that New Testament disciples are still recognizing that the Lord’s direction will always be accompanied by His provision.

Where the Lord directs you, He will develop you – His calling guarantees His enabling. If He wants you to fish, do not ever forget that He knows where the fish are; He knows what bait to use; He knows where to cast the line; He knows how many fish you will catch; He knows when you will need nourishment; He knows when you will need encouragement; and He knows when it is time to come to shore. He will never lead you somewhere and then leave you.

The amazing thing is that Jesus never said to them, or to us, “Follow Me and you will watch *Me* catching men.”

The truth is, Jesus could row the boat, cast the net, and haul everything to shore . . .” But instead, He has chosen to use us. He does not want a boatload of spectators, He wants us to roll up our sleeves, feel the tug on the nets, work together with others, and in His strength.

Chuck Swindoll applied this passage by writing, “Excellence in the Christian life requires casting our nets into the sea of humanity, while mediocrity lies tanning on the beach, watching the fishing boats of others sail by.”

This passage teaches us that Christ demands obedience, but He also delivers blessing. What do we do??? We get involved by throwing the net!

The risen Lord is still revealing His willingness to forgive and provide second and third chances.

7. One final observation is that the risen Lord is still revealing His willingness to forgive and provide second and third chances.

How do you think the disciples felt as they ate their fish with Jesus? Excited? Somewhat. Embarrassed? Perhaps. Uncertain? No doubt.

The wisdom of the world would say, "Lord, You selected twelve losers. Start over. Why waste any more time on them? They obviously, have no real potential."

In 1894, the rhetoric teacher at Harrow, in England, wrote on a sixteen-year-old's report card, "a conspicuous lack of success." That sixteen-year-old was Winston Churchill.

In 1902, the poetry editor of *The Atlantic Monthly* returned a sheaf of poems to a twenty-eight-year-old poet with this curt note, "Our magazine has no room for your vigorous verse." The poet was Robert Frost.

In 1905, the University of Berlin turned down a Ph.D. dissertation as being, "irrelevant and fanciful." The young physics student, who wrote the dissertation, was Albert Einstein, and his dissertation was on the theory of relativity.

There is no doubt in my mind that the disciples expected anything but another chance. After three years of training, they had flunked the final exam.

I also believe that they easily tied the events in these verses to the events three and a half years earlier – when Jesus had miraculously caused them to bring in an incredible catch and had then said, "From now on, I want you to be fishers of men."

They had failed Him. Why would He invite them to fish for men and women again?

I want you to see something wonderful. It was not the final exam after all. Look at verses 9 through 14 of John, chapter 21.

And so when they got out upon the land, they saw a charcoal fire already laid, and fish placed on it, and bread.

Jesus said to them, "Bring some of the fish which you have now caught."

Simon Peter went up, and drew the net to land, full of large fish, a hundred and fifty-three; and although there were so many, the net was not torn.

Jesus said to them, "Come and have breakfast." None of the disciples ventured to question Him, "Who are You?" knowing that it was the Lord.

Jesus came and took the bread, and gave them, and the fish likewise.

This is now the third time that Jesus was manifested to the disciples, after He was raised from the dead.

By the way, Jesus had always before given thanks before eating, but in verse 13, He does not. Why? Because He was the creative source. Notice that, even though, in verses 10 and 11, Peter dragged the net to shore and Jesus asked Peter to bring some of the fish, we are told in verse 9,

And so when they got out upon the land, they saw a charcoal fire already . . .

(present tense)

. . . laid, and fish placed on it, and bread.

Where did the bread come from? Where did the fish come from? How was the charcoal already glowing with heat? Miracle upon miracle, as Jesus Christ, the resurrected Creator, reveals His ability to not only command a school of fish into their nets, but create a fish, as well as bread, to eat.

Now back to principle at hand. In the Middle Eastern culture of Christ's day, to eat a meal with someone who has wronged you was the specific act of revealing that you have forgiven them. This was more than breakfast; this was Jesus Christ's special way of showing that He had forgiven them.

So, here is Jesus Christ playing Servant, Host, Cook, Waiter, Friend, Teacher, Lord. In effect, He was telling them that He had not, and would not, give up on them; cast them aside.

What Jesus wanted, as the rest of this chapter, which we will further study, will reveal, was for them to not give up either. He had plans for them; He had a future for them; He wanted them to be fishers of men after all.

Poland's famous concert pianist and prime minister, Ignace Paderewski, was in concert. The magnificent concert hall was packed and everyone was waiting in anticipation. A mother, wishing to

encourage her young son's progress at the piano, bought tickets for a performance. They had found their seats, near the front of the concert hall, and the young boy sat, awed by everything – including the majestic grand piano waiting on stage.

Soon, the mother found a friend to talk to, and the boy slipped away. Suddenly, the sound of piano playing was heard and, as the audience quieted, they saw that it was this young boy. He was seated on the bench, innocently picking out, "Twinkle, twinkle, little star."

His mother gasped and, at first, the crowd laughed. Then, however, people began to shout, "Get him off of there."

Before his mother could make it to the stage, the master had heard the commotion and appeared on the stage. He quickly moved to the piano and whispered to the boy, "Don't quit – keep playing."

Leaning over, Paderewski reached down with his left hand and began filling in a bass part. Then, his right arm reached around the other side, encircling the

child, to add a running obbligato. Together, beautifully, the old concert master and the young boy held the crowd mesmerized. All the while, Pederewski kept whispering, "Don't stop, son, don't quit."

In our lives, unpolished though we may be, it is the Master who surrounds us and whispers in our ear, time and again, "Don't quit – keep playing."

That was one of the lessons the fish and bread breakfast taught the disciples. And, it teaches us, also His disciples, the same thing.

You may not be accomplished – none of us really master life – wrong notes are played, no matter how hard we concentrate, our hands grow tired, our minds get distracted by the crowds, but Jesus Christ says, "Don't quit, don't stop."

When you fail Him and repent, Jesus Christ forgives. He continues to direct; He continues to offer nourishment and fellowship, and He says, "Don't stop now, play on." or rather, "Stay in the boat – don't stop. With the wind of faith in your sails – keep on fishing."

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