

Gone Fishing

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The only example we have of Jesus cooking is found in John 21, where he serves the disciples a fireside breakfast of bread and grilled fish on the seashore. Afterward, Jesus initiates a pointed conversation with Peter: “Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?” What does Jesus mean? Who or what are “these”? Why does Jesus repeat the question three times? What is the significance of Jesus’ pastoral commands to Peter?

Many have pondered this intriguing passage. Some find significance in the Greek words for “love” employed by Jesus and Peter. Others suggest that Jesus’ three repetitions recall Peter’s three denials, providing Peter the opportunity to reaffirm his love, thus healing the breach. In this article, we will explore this conversation in view of the context of the miracle on the sea.

The chapter begins with Peter’s decision to go fishing, which sounds like a good idea to the other disciples present, including James and John. But the all-night expedition proves futile. That is, until an unknown figure on the shore calls out to cast their nets on the other side, resulting in a miraculous haul of fish. John realizes right away it is the Lord—and little wonder, for this whole scene is a repeat of an earlier miracle.

On the same sea several years before, Peter, James, and John fished all night with no success (Luke 5:1-11). The next day as they worked on their nets, Jesus made use of Peter’s boat as a floating pulpit. After his lesson he instructed Peter to go out farther and let down the nets, resulting in a catch so large the nets and boats could hardly contain it. Peter fell at Jesus’ knees, who then said, “Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching men.” Thus began their journey as disciples. “And when they had brought their boats to land, they left everything and followed him.”

Fast-forward three years or so. Things have changed. After his crucifixion, Jesus rose from the dead just as he had promised. But his appearances are brief and sparse; he no longer lives and walks among them as he did before. What is to become of his disciples?

It is during this time that Peter announces, "I am going fishing" (John 21:3). Is this a way to pass the time? A means of providing food? Or a step toward returning to life as a fisherman?

When Jesus enters the scene, he performs the same sign as he had the day he called these men to become disciples. These twin miracles form bookends for Jesus' time on earth with Peter, James, and John. The last one ends like the first: "Follow me" (vs. 19). In fact, John's Gospel closes on the image of Jesus and Peter walking and talking, John following.

With those parallels in mind, let us return to the conversation between Jesus and Peter from that morning. The Lord's first words to Peter are interesting: "Bring some of the fish that you have just caught." But Jesus already has fish cooked. When Peter returns with the catch, Jesus invites the disciples to eat. The hundred fifty-three fish lie nearby, presumably still flopping in the net.

After they eat, Jesus addresses Peter directly: "Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?" There are at least three ways this question can be understood. 1) Do you love me more than these other men love me? 2) Do you love me more than you love these other men? 3) Do you love me more than you love the fish? Neither Jesus nor Peter clarify (for us) which is meant.

Peter responds, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." Jesus replies, "Feed my lambs." Three times the Lord asks; three times Peter affirms; and three times Jesus instructs Peter to tend his flock. Whatever else can be made of this, it is clear that Jesus' plans for Peter are spiritual in nature. Years before he had called Peter to become a fisher of men, and here he reaffirms not only Peter's standing as a disciple, but his mission as an apostle. To our knowledge, Peter, James, and John never cast another net in the water.

Perhaps we, too, need to be reminded of our own calling. At times our journey may not go as we expect; our world may be turned upside down; we may not understand how things will work out. But having put our hand to the plow, we must never look back. There is work to do. Don't be "gone fishing."

Jesus calls us, o'er the tumult

Of our life's wild, restless sea;

Day by day His sweet voice soundeth

Saying, "Christian, follow Me."

Eric Reynolds

(Scripture quotations from ESV)