

## John 21:1-19 Jesus Appears to the Disciples a Third Time

**Review:** None of the disciples expected Jesus to rise from the dead (20:9):

ESV **John 20:9** ... they did not understand the Scripture, that he must rise from the dead.

However, they changed their minds when Jesus unexpectedly appeared to them, alive and well! The first two times He appeared were inside a room, behind locked doors. Today's passage, John 21, deals with a third appearance, this time outside and far from Jerusalem. Jesus' resurrection is the ultimate proof that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God.

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**\*\*\*\*What did the disciples spend the night doing (21:1-3)?** Following Peter's suggestion, they spent it at sea, in a boat, fishing.

**Geography:** The scene has now shifted from Jerusalem to the Sea of Tiberias (21:1). The Sea of Tiberias was another way of referring to the Sea of Galilee. Tiberias was Roman Emperor from A.D. 14–37. Herod Antipas founded a city named Tiberias along the shore in A.D. 20. Over time, the name was transferred to the whole lake.

**The disciples had seen Jesus miraculously alive, not once, but twice. Why were they spending their time fishing (21:3)? Didn't they have anything better to do?** No reason was given. Probably they did not know what else to do, since they were awaiting further instructions. Also, they still had to eat!<sup>1</sup>

• **7/11 (21:2):** Seven out of eleven were there. Where the other four were was not stated (irrelevant).

**How much "luck" did they have at fishing (21:3)?** They caught nothing. Of course, their bad "luck" was not luck at all. It was part of God's divine plan that they catch nothing.

**Why were they fishing at night (21:3)?** It evidently was a common practice.<sup>2</sup> Perhaps it was to avoid the unrelenting, scorching rays of the sun. Perhaps the fish were more likely to be caught at night. Perhaps fresh fish were needed at the market in the early morning.

**Imagine the Scene:** Seven guys in a boat, fishing all night, with nothing to show for it. Surely they were tired, hungry, and disappointed.

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**\*\*\*\*Why did Peter throw himself into the sea (21:4-8)?** He threw himself into the sea because he recognized Jesus and wanted to get to Him quickly (21:7).

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<sup>1</sup> Carson, *John*, 669.

<sup>2</sup> *New Bible Dictionary*, 379.

**Most people take *off* their clothes to swim. Why did Peter put his *on* (21:7)?** Perhaps it shows Peter's excited irrationality.

**At first, they only saw that *someone* standing on the shore, but didn't realize it was Jesus (21:4). Why did Jesus open the conversation by asking them if they had any fish (21:5)?** Since He was God and knew everything already, it wasn't because He didn't know! He asked it for effect. His question was precisely because they didn't recognize Him, to call attention to their lack of success, and set the stage for the miracle He was about to perform.

- **“children” (21:5):** “Children” is from *paidion*, and evidently was a common way to address men at work, perhaps as “boys” might be today. The NIV renders it as “friends.”

**Why would they act on the advice of some random guy on the shore who told them to cast the net on the right of the boat (21:6)?** Maybe they supposed the stranger, from his higher vantage point on the shore, had seen some sign of fish in the water.

**According to 21:6, how many fish did they catch?** They caught so many that they could not “haul” the net back into the boat. “Haul” is from *helko*, “to haul or drag.” The same word was earlier used by Jesus:

ESV **John 6:44** No one can come to me unless the Father ... draws him.

**Why did catching the fish lead John to the conclusion that the man on the shore was Jesus (21:7)?** We are not told exactly why. Luke 5:1-11 records that a similar thing had happened before. Evidently the odd circumstance of the unusually huge catch was enough to persuade him. Peter was not in the least bit interested in that big load of fish they just supernaturally caught. He swam to shore, leaving the other disciples to follow behind in the boat, dragging<sup>3</sup> the net full of fish (21:8).

**Peter vs. John:** Both Peter and John ran to Jesus' empty tomb. John got there first, stopped outside the tomb, and pondered what had happened. When Peter arrived he rushed into the tomb. Whereas Peter left confused, John left believing. Now, in the boat, it was John who first recognized Jesus, but it was Peter to dove into the water to reach Jesus in a hurry.

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**\*\*\*\*After they reached land, what did the disciples see that they hadn't noticed before (21:9-14)?** They saw a charcoal fire with fish and bread already on it: breakfast! Jesus came not as a king, but as a servant, and He continued to serve them after His resurrection.

**Why did Jesus instruct them to add some of the fish they just caught (21:10-11)?** There obviously, on purpose, was not enough fish on the grill for everyone. Jesus' command brought renewed attention to the miraculous catch that was still in the net under water, causing Peter to get back aboard the boat to haul it in (he must have been a strong man). A spiritual lesson might be observed that just as Jesus did not need their fish, He allowed them to participate in His work of reaching the world, of being fishers of men.

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<sup>3</sup> “Dragging” (21:8) is from *suro*, not *helko*.

**How did the fish get out of the water (21:11)?** Peter alone went and hauled (*helko*) it out of the water. Seven men in the boat couldn't get it in the boat, but somehow Peter got it on shore. **Joke:** Instead of Simon Peter, they should have called him Samson Peter!

**What minor miracle did John record in 21:11?** Not only was Peter able to haul the net ashore by himself, but though there were so many fish, the net was not torn.

**Jesus was there with them, in person, and they spent their time counting the fish! Doubtless they were excited over the magnitude of the miracle. What is the significance of there being exactly 153 large fish (21:11)?** This is the numerical key to understand the whole book. Jesus rose from the dead on the 3<sup>rd</sup> day. That's the reason for the 3 in 153. There were 12 disciples, and  $12 + 3 = 15$ , thus accounting for the 15 in the number 153. A lot of people miss that. The reason they miss it is because 153 actually has no significance, except that it emphasizes exactly how "full" the net was (normally enough to tear the net).

**What invitation did Jesus offer in 21:12a?** He invited them to breakfast.

**Application:** If Jesus invites you to breakfast, accept His invitation:

ESV **Revelation 3:20** Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me.

**Why did they want to ask Jesus who he was (21:12)?** The text states that they all knew it was Jesus. No doubt about it. Perhaps they found it too good to be true, fearing it was a dream from which they would awake. It was like it was too good to be true. The sense here is that the disciples wanted to ask, "Is it *really* you?"<sup>4</sup>

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**\*\*\*\*Why did Jesus predict how Peter would die (21:15-19)?** Earlier when Peter said he would die for Jesus, he ended up denying three times that he even knew Jesus. Peter's actual death would be a different; it would glorify God (21:19). Jesus' statement about Peter's death was to reassure Peter that he would remain faithful to the end (and not deny Jesus again).

**First Jesus grilled the fish, then He grilled Peter! Why did Jesus ask Peter the same question three times (21:15-17)?** It likely had something to do with the fact that Peter had denied Jesus three times:

ESV **John 13:37-38** Peter said to him, "... I will lay down my life for you." Jesus answered, "Will you lay down your life for me? Truly, truly, I say to you, the rooster will not crow till you have denied me three times."

Jesus gave Peter a chance to publically redeem himself, and then three times commissioned Jesus to care for His flock. This showed that Jesus accepted Peter and restored him to a position of usefulness.

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<sup>4</sup> Carson, *John*, 674.

## Jesus' First Question

**What hard question did Jesus ask Peter in 21:15?** Jesus questioned Peter's love.

**To what do the word "these" refer; these what (21:15)?** It could refer to either the fishing gear or the other disciples:

- 1) Even though it was Peter's idea that the disciples go fishing, since Peter so quickly abandoned ship to swim to Jesus suggests he didn't care too much for the fishing gear.
- 2a) If "these" refers to the other disciples, how Peter was supposed to know how much they loved Jesus to determine if Peter loved Jesus more than they did?
- 2b) Perhaps Jesus was asking if Peter loved Jesus more than Peter loved the other disciples. As Jesus said:

ESV **Matthew 10:37** Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me, and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me.

- **"love" (21:15):** From *agapao*, which means "to have a preference for, to regard the welfare of."<sup>5</sup> Defining this word for love based on John's usage in the book, it involves self sacrifice (**3:16**), commitment (**13:1**) and obedience (**14:15**):

ESV **John 3:16** For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son ...

ESV **John 13:1** ... when Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart out of this world to the Father, having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end.

ESV **John 14:15** If you love me, you will keep my commandments.

It could of course involve feelings, but it always involved the above three characteristics.

**Jesus asked if Peter had *agapao* for Jesus, and Peter replied that he had *phileo* for Jesus, yet the English simply has "love" in both instances. Why is that?** The ESV simply has "love" in both cases because the current thinking is that there is no difference in meaning. The two words are essentially synonymous.<sup>6</sup> For example:

ESV **John 13:23** One of his disciples, whom Jesus loved (*agapao*) ...

ESV **John 20:2** ... the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved (*phileo*) ...

**What commission did Jesus give Peter in 21:15?** It was to feed His lambs. Jesus fed them a literal breakfast, and here He told Peter to metaphysically feed others.

**What would it mean for Peter to feed Jesus' lambs (21:15)?** Jesus' lambs are those who follow Him:

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<sup>5</sup> Thayer, Lexicon, #25.

<sup>6</sup> John Walvoord, Roy Zuck, "New Testament", *Bible Knowledge Commentary* (Wheaton: Victor, 1986), 345.

ESV **John 10:27** My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me.

For Peter to metaphysically feed Jesus' lambs meant to help them know and obey Jesus' commands. For example:

ESV **John 4:34** Jesus said to them, "My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to accomplish his work."

### Jesus' Second Question

**What was the second question Jesus asked Peter (21:16)?** Jesus questioned Peter's love again. As before, two different words for love were used, and as before without distinction.

**What commission did Jesus give Peter in 21:16?** It was to tend His sheep.

**Did Jesus intend any difference between "feed" (21:15) and "tend" (21:16)?** Probably not; it is a type of parallelism found in Hebrew poetry. They are synonymous terms.

- **"tend" (21:16):** From *poimaino*, "to feed, to rule, to govern, to furnish pasturage."<sup>7</sup> The noun form of this verb is often translated as "pastor" it refers to a shepherd. A shepherd feeds, guards, guides, and cares for the flock.

### Jesus' Third Question

**In 21:17, what did Jesus do that grieved Peter?** Jesus questioned Peter's love a third time.

**Why was Peter grieved that Jesus asked him the same question so many times (21:17)?** Peter understandable concluded that Jesus doubted his sincerity and commitment.

- **"love" (21:17):** Every instance of the word "love" in 2:17 is from *phileo* rather than *agapao*. Jesus Himself changed words. This change, however, was stylistic and holds no interpretive significance.<sup>8</sup>

**Each time, part of Peter's reply to Jesus included the statement, "you know" (21:15, 16). This time he added: "you know everything" (2:17). Why did Peter keep saying that Jesus knew?** Peter knew that since Jesus was God, He already knew full well whether or not Peter really loved Him or not.

**What commission did Jesus give Peter in 2:17?** As before, it was to feed His sheep.

**Application:** Many people serve the Lord for a variety of reasons: they want to help others, they enjoy using their spiritual gifts, etc. Based on Jesus' three questions about love, the one essential prerequisite to effectively minister to God's people is love for Jesus as the motivator (and others):

ESV **1 Corinthians 13:2** ... if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing.

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<sup>7</sup> Thayer, *Lexicon*, #4165.

<sup>8</sup> It is commonly thought that Jesus spoke to the disciples in Aramaic, not Greek. John translated it for the sake of his readers since they lived outside Palestine and didn't speak Aramaic. Thus in that sense, Jesus never literally said *agapao* nor *phileo* in his conversation with Peter. John's translation, however, is inspired by the Holy Spirit.

ESV **Revelation 2:4** But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first.

**According to Jesus, how would Peter die (21:18)?** Jesus predicted that Peter's death would:

- 1) Be when Peter was but old (history indicates he died 30 years later, in the A.D. 60s).
- 2) Involve stretching out his hands (a common way then to refer to crucifixion<sup>9</sup>).
- 3) Involve being dressed by someone else (Jesus was mockingly dressed as a king).
- 4) Include being carried where he did not want to go (to be executed).

Scripture does not record Peter's death. Historical writings indicate he was killed because of His faith, but does not indicate how he was killed. It is likely he died in the A.D. 60s, under Nero's reign of terror. He never would have faced crucifixion had he not been a faithful follower of Christ.

**Would you like to know how you will die?** Peter lived for thirty years with this prediction hanging over his head.

ESV **Psalms 139:16** ... in your book were written, every one of them, the days that were formed for me, when as yet there were none of them.

**What was Jesus' final invitation to Peter (21:19)?** Jesus re-issued the invitation to follow Him.

### So What?

**What was Jesus' purpose in appearing this third time to the disciples (21:14)?** It was important to John to point out that this sea-shore breakfast made the third time Jesus was revealed to the disciples after He was raised from the dead. It's said that the time's a charm (a person is sure to succeed at a task on the third attempt). This third appearance was outside and served to continue strengthen their faith. It also showed His control over all things, including the fish of the sea.

**What is the significance of John's comment that Peter's death would "glorify God" (20:19)?**

**Application:** Many of us have failed through cowardice, or sin, or a bungled attempt at ministry. There is hope for those of us who have blown it, just as there was for Peter. One difference between Peter and Judas, is that Judas never came back to ask for forgiveness.

\*\*\*\* = Ask this question before reading the text. This will engage people's minds and focus their attention.

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<sup>9</sup> Carson, *John*, 679.