

Eternity Daily Bible Study – No. 338  
Series: St. John's Passion - Gospel of John chapters 12-21  
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Verses: John 21:7-14  
Topic: The Big Catch – Part 2

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John 21:7 Therefore that disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, "It is the Lord!" Now when Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he put on his outer garment (for he had removed it), and plunged into the sea. 8 But the other disciples came in the little boat (for they were not far from land, but about two hundred cubits), dragging the net with fish. 9 Then, as soon as they had come to land, they saw a fire of coals there, and fish laid on it, and bread. 10 Jesus said to them, "Bring some of the fish which you have just caught." 11 Simon Peter went up and dragged the net to land, full of large fish, one hundred and fifty-three; and although there were so many, the net was not broken. 12 Jesus said to them, "Come and eat breakfast." Yet none of the disciples dared ask Him, "Who are You?"--knowing that it was the Lord. 13 Jesus then came and took the bread and gave it to them, and likewise the fish. 14 This is now the third time Jesus showed Himself to His disciples after He was raised from the dead.

The number 153 has everyone curious. It adds up to 9 (1 + 5 + 3) and mathematically it is nine times seventeen and it is also the sum of the whole numbers from one to seventeen – that is 1 + 2 + 3 + 4 + 5 + 6 all the way to 17. Here are some other explanations:

- The word fish in Greek is 'ixthus' which has a numerical equivalent of 1224, or 8 x 153. The fish was a symbol of Jesus (see below)
- 153 people received a blessing from Jesus in the four gospel (not counting the 5000 and examples like that).
- There were supposed to be 153 species of fish in the ancient world. Thus 153 represents all different kinds of people.

Others see it as an example of Hebrew gematria – word play using numbers, to quote one source: Various words associated with fishing have gematria divisible by 153: "fishes" has a value of 153 x 8, "the net" has the same 153 x 8 value, "multitude of fishes" is 153 x 16, "fishers of men" is 153 x 14, "casting a net into the sea" is 153 x 20, etc. According to biblewheel.com some bible phrases in the original Hebrew have a gematria value of 153 e.g. "I am the Lord thy God", "the Passover", "He is faithful", "he shall cause to inherit" and "sons of God". This is more than coincidence.

The Diocletian persecution was raging at the time John wrote his gospel and the symbol of the "fish" for Christ was in wide use. The Greek word for fish was Ixthus and Ixthus was an acronym (abbreviation using initials e.g. IBM) and stood for Jesus Christ, God's Son, Savior (in Greek Iesus, Xristos, Theos, Uios, Sotier.)

So "153 fish" takes the "theological attributes" of 153 (Sons of God, I am the Lord thy God etc) and adds them to the fish which was well-known as the symbol of Jesus Christ. It was a way of saying Jesus, Son of God, Savior, Passover, I am the Lord thy God, etc during the Diocletian

persecution that had John imprisoned on Patmos. As John was known as the apostle to the persecuted church, and was often cryptic in his communication this makes some sense.

So if anyone asks you "what do the 153 fish mean" you can say – it's a cryptogram for Jesus being God.

Fishing with a dragnet (like the disciples used) was also a type of the end of the age: Matthew 13:47-50 "Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a dragnet cast into the sea, and gathering fish of every kind; and when it was filled, they drew it up on the beach; and they sat down and gathered the good fish into containers, but the bad they threw away." So it will be at the end of the age; the angels will come forth and take out the wicked from among the righteous, and will throw them into the furnace of fire; in that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

Now on to the rest of the passage: The seven apostles bring the 153 fish to the resurrected Savior who has a fire burning – with bread and fish already on it. The fire is a fire of coals – typically used for purification and associated with Isaiah's call and cleansing (Isaiah 6). Fire is also strongly associated with the Holy Spirit. Bread and fish brings to mind the feeding of the 5000, also the first resurrection meal was some bread on the Emmaus Road and a "piece of broiled fish" among the disciples.

This is a time of purification and rededication, a time of going back to their original calling as "fishers of men" (Matthew 4:18,19) purified by the fire of the Holy Spirit and the broken body of Christ symbolized in the bread and the fish. Thus the occasion is loaded with meaning and "they knew it was the Lord".

Jesus said to them, "Come and eat breakfast." – an invitation to simple fellowship that could not be refused by hungry (and perplexed) fishermen. Jesus often invites us to simple things, to a small church, to a plain preacher, to a bible study in a home with good, godly folk. Yet He will also invite us to a wedding feast. Peter has to eat with Jesus, feel accepted and get over his shame. He had jumped in the water, he feels unworthy and it will take a chat with Jesus to set him right again but Peter is on his way, he is now eating with the Savior.

"And yet the net was not broken" – how can we cope with so many converts? The net will not break – pull it in! Some gospel ministers are timid the changes large numbers of converts will bring. Just a few, not too many! But bold faith loves a big catch and God will strengthen you to cope.

As we near the end of the age the dragnet is being pulled in. I like to think that the Internet is part of the dragnet – bringing in folk from all nations to the gospel (see <http://www.cybermissions.org>). Let Jesus minister to you, and have fellowship with you, and restore you and send you out to be fishers of men and women.

Blessings,

John

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