

## John 21: A Fishing Trip

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John 21 is almost like an epilogue to the Gospel of John. In many ways, the theme of the book (stated in John 20:31-32) is brought to a conclusion there. This last chapter pulls us back to satisfy one of the great questions of the life of Christ: what happened to Peter after betraying Jesus?

It begins in Galilee, called here the Sea of Tiberius (for the Roman town of Tiberius). Jesus had told the disciples to travel to Galilee (Matthew 28:10,16) and meet with Him. John says that this was the third time they met. It is interesting that Matthew says that some of the disciples still had doubts even at Galilee.

Seven of the disciples went fishing. After working all night, they had nothing to show for their labor. This story parallels Luke 5:1-11, when they were first called by Jesus. Then, they threw their nets on the other side, and their nets tore when they brought in the haul. This time the nets do not break, but they bring them to shore. Consider that in Luke 5 they have not yet been equipped to be “fisher of men”. Now, at the conclusion of the Gospel, they are equipped to bring the haul in, perhaps symbolic of their being ready to go unto all the world. John even tells us the exact number of the fish they brought in: 153.

Knowing now it is the Lord, they come to shore and find Jesus at a charcoal fire. When was the last time a charcoal fire appeared in this Gospel? In John 18:18, 25-27, we are told that Peter was standing over a charcoal fire when he denied Jesus. Now, just as Peter denied Jesus three times, Jesus asks Peter (whom He calls Simon, almost as though Peter is no longer worthy of that special name he received at the beginning of John 1) three times: do you love me?

The nature and language of the question is interesting. First of all, Jesus asks Peter “*Do you love me more than these?*” We assume that “these” refers to the other disciples; Peter had said in the past that “*even though all may fall away because of You, I will never fall away*” (Matthew 26:33). Yet at that time Jesus had told Peter that Satan sought to sift him, and that Jesus prayed he would return to aid his brothers (Luke 22:31-33).

Another point of interest is the words for love Jesus and Peter use. Jesus asks (the first two times) “do you love (AGAPEO) me”; each time Peter answers “I love (PHILEOS) you”. Agapeos is the more mature love of a Christian, while Phileos speaks to the affection we have for others. Finally, Jesus third questions asks “do you love (PHILEOS) me”, and Peter is grieved in his answer. Jesus asked Peter if He loved Jesus with a love that sought the best for His kingdom; Peter kept replying that He had an affection for Jesus. It seems that Peter did not get it. But then Jesus says that Peter will have the chance in life, for he will be called to die for the sake of the Gospel.

Much later in Peter’s life, Peter tells us in his last letter that he is preparing to die as Jesus said (2 Peter 1:12-15). What is of interest to John 21 is Peter’s message in 2 Peter 1:5-8; there Peter gives us his last important point about growing in grace. The last two steps are of great importance to us: “*and in your godliness, brotherly kindness (PHILEO), and in your brotherly kindness, love (AGAPEO)*”. Yes, it seems Peter did understand the point of the message. We may have an affection for Jesus, but by difficult times and experiences we can grow into a true love for Him.