



International Bible Study Commentary

Verse-by-Verse Bible Lessons Thru the Bible

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John 21:1-8 Commentary **New Revised Standard Version**

Questions for Discussion and Thinking Further follow the verse-by-verse [International Bible Study Commentary](#). **Study Hints for Discussion and Thinking Further** will help with class preparation and in conducting class discussion: these hints are available on the *International Bible Study Commentary* website along with the *International Bible Lesson* that you may want to read to your class as part of your Bible study. You can discuss each week's commentary and lesson at the [International Bible Study Forum](#).

Matthew concluded his gospel with the Great Commission to all who saw Jesus ascend into heaven on Ascension Sunday (Matthew 28:16-20). Mark also ended his gospel with a commission from Jesus in Mark 16:14-15, "Later he appeared to the eleven themselves as they were sitting at the table; and he upbraided them for their lack of faith and stubbornness, because they had not believed those who saw him after he had risen. And he said to them, Go into all the world and proclaim the good news to the whole creation." Luke also concluded his gospel with Jesus reminding His disciples that they were to testify about Him, but they were to wait until they had received the power from on high. In Luke 24:48-49, Jesus said, "You are witnesses of these things. And see, I am sending upon you what my Father promised; so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high," which happened on Pentecost Sunday. Likewise, John concluded his gospel with a commission to all Jesus' disciples through Peter and the other fishermen disciples. They were to follow Jesus supremely and Peter who was to tend Jesus' sheep as their leader. In Matthew 16:18, Jesus had commissioned Peter to lead the New Testament Church with these words, "And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it."

(John 21:1) After these things Jesus showed himself again to the disciples by the Sea of Tiberias; and he showed himself in this way.

When Jesus began His public ministry, He went to the Sea of Galilee (also called the Sea of Tiberias) and called Simon Peter and Andrew to follow Him, saying He would teach them how to fish for people (see Mark 4:18-20). The Greek New Testament, the KJV, the NASB, and the NRSV use “the Sea of Tiberias” name in this verse—the NIV uses “the Sea of Galilee” name. The Sea of Galilee was also called the Sea of Tiberias and the Lake of Gennesaret where Jesus later preached from a boat belonging to Simon and where He helped Simon, Andrew, James and John fill two boats full of fish, telling them that from now on they would fish for people (see John 6:1 and Luke 5:1-11). As John reports, after His resurrection, Jesus appeared to His disciples in Galilee just as He told them He would (see also Mark 16:7). It is fitting that Jesus would appear to them like He had at their first meeting and do what He did before so they would recognize Him and He could confirm that they were now fully prepared to fish for people, His sheep. Jesus did not restrict himself to appearing to His disciples only when they were in prayer or gathered for fellowship. Jesus could appear, and did appear, to them when they were hard at work fishing early in the morning. Jesus appeared to them as the angel of the LORD sometimes appeared to His judges and prophets in the Old Testament when they were doing hard work. For example, in Judges 6:11, when God called Gideon we read, “Now the angel of the LORD came and sat under the oak at Ophrah, which belonged to Joash the Abiezrite, as his son Gideon was beating out wheat in the wine press, to hide it from the Midianites.” Jesus can also get our attention in the midst of a busy life while we are working hard, for God seeks and calls those who know how to work hard and who will work hard to do His will as faithful servants. Still, our hearts and minds are more attuned to learning of Him and discovering His will for us during prayer, Bible study, Christian fellowship, and worship.

(John 21:2) Gathered there together were Simon Peter, Thomas called the Twin, Nathanael of Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two others of his disciples.

It seems that only those disciples who were fishermen were present when Jesus appeared to them from the shore of the Sea of Tiberias, for they all went fishing. Andrew was a partner with his brother Peter in their business of fishing, so he was probably present at this event; but, if so, he was unnamed (see Matthew 4:18). It seems appropriate that Thomas was present (“Didymus” means “Twin;” traditionally he came to be called “Doubting Thomas”—see John 20:24-29). Nathanael from Cana was the one who wondered that anything good could come from Nazareth (see John 1:45-49), so it is interesting that he was present. James and John were the sons of Zebedee and were Simon’s fishing partners (see Matthew 10:2 and Luke 5:10). Philip was from Bethsaida as were Simon and Andrew, so he may have been a fisherman and may have been the other person present (see John 1:44). Though probable that Andrew and Philip were the “two other disciples,” that is speculation—the Bible does not tell us specifically.

(John 21:3) Simon Peter said to them, “I am going fishing.” They said to him, “We will go with you.” They went out and got into the boat, but that night they caught nothing.

The disciples of Jesus had not yet received the “Great Commission” on the mountain in Galilee (see Matthew 28:16-20). Nor had they yet returned to Judea near Jerusalem where Jesus would ascend into heaven from a location near Bethany (see Luke 24:50-53). They were in Galilee where Jesus had instructed them to go (see Matthew 28:7-10). They were not just sitting around doing nothing while waiting for Jesus to appear as He promised. They were doing what they knew to do, which was fishing. They were meeting their daily needs and the needs of their families through their fishing occupation. They were safely away from the authorities in Jerusalem, who might have sought to kill them as followers of Jesus. They were awaiting further instructions from Jesus, and probably discussing all they had learned and experienced throughout Jesus’ public ministry with them as well as other appearances to them and others after His resurrection. Jesus gave them time to think things through together and come to a greater understanding of Him as He appeared to them at various times during forty days of appearances (see Acts 1:3). Jesus’ appearance to them at the Sea of Galilee was untimed and unexpected by them. They

never tried to bring Jesus back in some mystical manner. After Jesus sent the Holy Spirit to indwell them on the Day of Pentecost, He would live within them (and within all who believe in Him) in a closer relationship than when He walked with them in the world (see Colossians 1:27).

About three years earlier, when Jesus met them for the first time and called them to be His disciples, they had caught nothing, so He showed them where to fish (Luke 5:5-6). Likewise, when they went fishing with Peter, during the night they caught nothing, but in the early morning hours Jesus appeared to them and with His help they soon caught a great haul of fish. Likewise, they would not be able to fish for people successfully without Jesus' help. Peter showed that he was a natural born leader when he called out that he was going fishing and the others wanted to go with him. After the Holy Spirit indwelt Peter on the Day of Pentecost, God enhanced his leadership skills and he preached the first sermon the disciples preached about Jesus, which led to about three thousand people coming to faith in Jesus and joining the Church in one day (see Acts 2:41).

(John 21:4) Just after daybreak, Jesus stood on the beach; but the disciples did not know that it was Jesus.

The disciples were not expecting to see Jesus. They were quite a distance from the shore (at that moment more than 100 yards) so they did not recognize Him in the morning light.

(John 21:5) Jesus said to them, “Children, you have no fish, have you?” They answered him, “No.”

A voice will carry quite well over water, and Jesus, the Son of God, would have had no problem speaking to them no matter how far away. In the Greek New Testament, Jesus called them “Children” (see also KJV, NASB, NRSV—NIV calls them “Friends”). The Greek word means small children who need to be taught, which can also refer to immature Christians. “Children” seems appropriate in this situation, but Jesus also called His disciples His “Friends.” In John 15:14-15, we read these words of Jesus: “You are my friends if you do what I command you. I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is

doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father.” They were His friends, but they still needed to learn more from Jesus. Not knowing it was Jesus, the disciples in the boat obeyed Jesus’ command (probably through the influence of the Holy Spirit).

(John 21:6) He said to them, “Cast the net to the right side of the boat, and you will find some.” So they cast it, and now they were not able to haul it in because there were so many fish.

Jesus commanded them to cast their net on “the right side of the boat” where the fish were. They had to obey Jesus to catch the fish where Jesus had brought them. If we want to be successful according to the will of God, we must do as Jesus has commanded. If they had not obeyed Jesus, they would not have caught any fish. At Jesus’ command, even the fish obeyed Him, and the disciples caught more fish than their net would usually be able to hold without tearing. They caught so many fish that working together they were not strong enough to haul the fish-filled net into the boat. Likewise, after they received the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost and began to fish for people, we are amazed at how many people came to believe in Jesus after one sermon (“about three thousand,” see Acts 2:41).

(John 21:7) That disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, “It is the Lord!” When Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he put on some clothes, for he was naked, and jumped into the sea.

In John 10:27, Jesus said, “My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me.” With good and inspired hearing, John recognized Jesus’ voice and His presence from their immediate success at fishing with His help. The writer of the Gospel of John identifies himself as “the disciple whom Jesus loved.” Knowing that Jesus loved all His disciples, he probably spoke this way as an expression of his humility, so as not to speak about himself by name with pride when he was involved in the narrative. Though John could not see to identify Jesus at that distance, he knew from the miracle (a miracle of Jesus that he had experienced at least once before) that the man on the shore was “the Lord” Jesus. Immediately, after Peter learned this, he clothed himself appropriately and he jumped into the sea to be with the

Lord. For freedom of movement, the fisherman took off their outer clothing that encumbered them. Known for his eagerness, after putting on his outer garment, Peter jumped into the water and swam and/or waded to shore (probably not even thinking about the water's depth or knowing from experience that it was shallow that close to shore).

(John 21:8) But the other disciples came in the boat, dragging the net full of fish, for they were not far from the land, only about a hundred yards off.

Since they could not haul the fish into the boat, they towed the net full of fish with them as they made their way to shore. When they recognized Jesus, they did not leave their important work of fishing behind them or let their net full of fish drop back into the sea to hurry ashore, for Jesus had given them a command to meet their needs—the task of catching fish on the right side of their boat. They determined to do all that Jesus commanded them as they hurried to meet Him with their catch of fish.

Questions for Discussion and Thinking Further

1. What reasons might Jesus have had for telling His disciples to go to Galilee where He would meet them? See Mark 16:7.
2. Who among the disciples seems to be a natural leader? Can you give one or more examples?
3. Why do you think the disciples went fishing?
4. What do you think the disciples learned from their fishing experiences with Jesus?
5. How do you think John knew that it was the Lord?

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