

John 21:1–6 — Jesus Showed Himself Again

The Divine Initiative, a Night That Caught Nothing, and the Morning Already Breaking

Scripture Reading: John 21:1–13

“After these things Jesus shewed himself again to the disciples at the sea of Tiberias; and on this wise shewed he himself.

There were together Simon Peter, and Thomas called Didymus, and Nathanael of Cana in Galilee, and the sons of Zebedee, and two other of his disciples. Simon Peter saith unto them, I go a fishing. They say unto him, We also go with thee.

They went forth, and entered into a ship immediately; and that night they caught nothing. But when the morning was now come, Jesus stood on the shore: but the disciples knew not that it was Jesus.

Then Jesus saith unto them, Children, have ye any meat? They answered him, No. And he said unto them, Cast the net on the right side of the ship, and ye shall find. They cast therefore, and now they were not able to draw it for the multitude of fishes.”

It Began with Him

The chapter opens with its own account of the origin of this event: “After these things Jesus showed himself again to the disciples at the sea of Tiberias; and on this wise showed he himself.” The fishing expedition is how the story looks from the disciples’ side. But from the first verse we are told how it actually originated: Jesus showed himself. It began with him. He had business with them; there was

need; there was something he purposed to do. The disciples were going about their own affairs, but that is not the source of this story. He was.

This is one of those occasions — along with the encounter with Mary at the sepulchre and the walk to Emmaus — where the risen Lord appeared to someone who knew him but did not recognize him at first. In none of these cases was the Lord identified by his outward appearance. Mary supposed him to be the gardener; the two on the road to Emmaus did not know him until he broke bread; here the disciples did not know him until the haul of fish gave John the intelligence to say, It is the Lord. In each case, recognition came through something he did or said, not through a face simply looked upon. This is consistent with the character of resurrection life.

I Go a Fishing: Fruitlessness Without His Direction

Peter said, I go a fishing. The others said, We also go with thee. This is brotherly love of a kind — they would not let him go alone. But there is something more precious than brotherly love: the divine love that centers on the Lord Jesus himself. Mary in the previous chapter stood weeping at the sepulchre with no thought of fishing. The disciples' going with Peter, though done in good fellowship, produced no fruit. That night they caught nothing.

It was not for lack of fish. The same lake that night yielded 153 great fish at the Lord's word. The lake had plenty of fish. What was lacking was his direction. God arranged the circumstances — the empty net all night, the hunger, the coming morning — to bring them to the place where everything in the chapter could be for the manifestation of the person of Christ. Without him they could do nothing. And he withheld the fish so that the haul when it came would be unmistakably his doing, and the recognition unmistakably his initiative.

There is a lesson about influence woven into those words, We also go with thee. What is said or decided by one person may move others to go the same way, and

the result may be a night of fruitlessness. This is not to say God cannot overrule it — here he did. But the direction that bears fruit comes from him, not from Peter's natural energy, however well-intentioned.

The Symbolic Character of This Section and the Future Remnant

The words after these things and on this wise showed he himself mark a transition. Various writers have noted that from verse 1 through verse 14, the passage has a symbolic character unlike the rest of the gospel, and this is connected with what lies beyond the present age. The net not breaking — in contrast to Luke 5 where the net did break — speaks to the character of the millennial gathering. J.N. Darby remarked that the net breaking in Luke was simply the system giving way, as Christianity as a system in the earth has failed. But in the millennium, the Lord himself will carry it out perfectly and the net will not break. His administration will know no failure.

The three appearances to a group of disciples have a progressive significance: the first pointing to things Christian, the second (with Thomas) pointing to the Jewish remnant being brought into blessing through evidence, and the third to the millennial gathering of the nations through the testimony of the remnant. The morning already breaking — JND's rendering of verse 4 — carries a note of Malachi's Sun of Righteousness rising. It is the dawn of a new day. The gospel of the kingdom will go out again from the godly remnant of Israel, who will know by the numbers that Daniel's weeks are running, and a great haul from among the Gentiles will be the result.

That Disciple Whom Jesus Loved

In verse 7, John refers to himself as he always does in this gospel: that disciple whom Jesus loved. He does not say the disciple who loved Jesus — that would have been presumptuous, of the same spirit as Peter's boast that he would go

through fire and water for the Lord. Instead, the emphasis is always on the Lord's love for John, not John's love for the Lord. "Keep yourselves in the love of God" (Jude 21) — that does not mean keep God loving you; it means let the sunshine of his love fall fully on you, as you keep yourself in the place where it shines. John was in that sense. He kept himself in the sense of the love of the Lord Jesus toward him.

And it is this disciple who discerned first: It is the Lord. There seems to be a connection between living in the sense of his love and discernment. When the evidence of the overflowing net came, John's soul was already in the right place to read it. He said it at once, almost as an aside — Peter, it is the Lord. The recognition was not slow or uncertain. It was immediate, and it came from a soul that was keeping itself in the love of the Lord Jesus.

After these things Jesus showed himself. It began with him, and it ends with him.