

Exposition of the Gospel of John CHAPTER 70

CHRIST BY THE SEA OF TIBERIAS

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Transcript

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CHAPTER 70

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John 21:1-14

The following is an Analysis of our present passage:— 1. Christ's third appearing to the apostles, verses 1, 14. 2. The seven on the sea, verses 2, 3. 3. Their dulness and emptiness, verses 4, 5. 4. The miracle of the fishes, verse 6. 5. John's recognition and Peter's response, verse 7. 6. The landing of the six, verses 8, 9. 7. Christ's welcome, verses 10-13. The opening verses of this Gospel are in the nature of a Prologue, so the closing chapter is more or less an Epilogue. In the former, the Holy Spirit has set forth what Christ was before He came forth from the Father; in the latter He has shown, in mystical guise, how He now rules the world after His return to the Father. "The prologue is intended to exhibit the external life of Christ as it preceded His manifestation in the world; the epilogue appears to have for its scope, to exhibit His spiritual sway in the world as it would continue after He had left it" (Lange). All here has a profound significance. The disciples are on the sea; the Lord, no longer with them, directs from the shore, manifesting His power by working with them in their seemingly lonesome toil, and exhibiting His love in providing food for them. Then the charge is left to "feed his sheep." His final word was a reference to His coming again. The varied details of chapter 21 supply a most instructive and marvelously complete lesson on service. In the previous chapter we have seen the Savior establishing the hearts of the apostles by His word of "Peace," endowing them with the Holy Spirit, and then commissioning them to proclaim remission of sins. Here we have, in symbolic form, the apostles engaged in active ministry. The order is most suggestive. What we receive from the Lord Jesus is to be used for the good of others. Freely we have received, freely we are now to give. The key to the practical significance of the scene here portrayed lies in the almost identical circumstances when the apostles received their first ministerial call—Luke 5. The chapter as a whole falls into seven parts as we analyze it from the viewpoint of its teaching on service. First, we see men serving in the energy of the flesh (John 21:2, 3). Peter says, "I go a fishing." He had received no call from God to do so. His action illustrates self-will, and the response of the other six men acting under human leadership. Second, we are shown the barrenness of such efforts (John 21:3-5). They toiled all night, but caught nothing, and when the Lord asked if they had any meat, they had to answer, No. Third, the Lord now

directs their energies, telling them where to work (John 21:6): the result was that the net was filled with fishes. Fourth, we learn of the Lord's gracious provision for His servants (John 21:12, 13): He had provided for them, and invites them to eat. Fifth, we are taught what is the only acceptable motive for service—love to Christ (John 21:15, 17). Sixth, the Lord makes known how that He appoints the time and manner of the death of those of His servants who die (John 21:18, 19). Seventh, the Lord concludes by leaving with them the prospect of His return; not for death, but for Himself they should look (John 21:20, 24). The miracle in John 21 stands alone: it is the only recorded one which Christ wrought after His resurrection, and most fittingly is it the last narrated in this Gospel. Its striking resemblance to the first miracle which some of these disciples had witnessed (Luke 5:1-11) must have brought to their remembrance the very similar circumstances under which they had been called by Christ to leave their occupation as fishermen and become fishers of men. Thus they would be led to interpret this present "sign" by the past one, and see in it a renewed summons to their work of catching men, and a renewed assurance that their labor in the Lord would not be in vain. Suitably was it the last miracle which they witnessed at the hands of their Master, for it supplied a symbol which would continually animate them to and in their service for Him. It was designed to assure them that just as He had prospered their efforts while He was with them in the flesh, so they could count on His guidance, power, and blessing when He was absent from them. This final miracle of the Savior was performed in Galilee, so also was His first (i.e., the turning of the water into wine), and it seems clear that the Holy Spirit would have us use the law of comparison and contrast again. The author of "The Companion Bible" has called attention to quite a number of striking correspondences between the two miracles: we mention a few, leaving the interested reader to work out the others for himself. In both miracles there is a striking background: in the one we have the confession of Nathanael (John 1:49); in the other, the confession of Thomas (John 20:28). The first miracle was on "the third day" (John 2:1); the latter was "the third time" the Lord showed Himself to the apostles (John 21:14). The one was occasioned by them having "no wine" (John 2:3); the other, by them having no fish (John 21:3, 5). In both the Lord uttered a command: "Fill the waterpots" (John 2:7); "Cast the net" (John 21:6). In both Christ furnished a bountiful supply: the water pots were "filled to the brim" (John 2:7); the net full of great fishes (John 21:11). In both a number is mentioned: "six waterpots" (John 2:6); "one hundred and fifty and three fishes" (John 21:11). In both Christ manifested His Deity (John 2:11; 21:12, 14). How much we lose by not carefully comparing scripture with scripture! "After these things Jesus showed himself again to the disciples at the sea of Tiber, as; and on this wise showed he" (John 21:1). "After these things" always marks off a distinct section in John's writings. The earlier appearances of the risen Savior were in view of the then condition and need of the apostles to establish their faith and assure their hearts. But here, what the Lord did and said, had a prophetic significance, anticipating and picturing His future relations to them. "Jesus showed himself," not presenting Himself, but manifested His presence, power, and glory. It was not simply that the disciples saw him, but that he revealed Himself. "His body after the resurrection was only visible by a distinct act of His will. From that time the disciples did not, as before, see Jesus, but He appeared unto them. It is not for nothing that the language is changed. Henceforth, He was to be recognized not by the flesh, but by the spirit; not by human faculties, but by Divine perceptions: His disciples were to walk by faith, and not by sight" (Chrysostom). When we are told in Acts 1:3 that the Lord Jesus was "seen of them forty days," it does not mean that the Lord was corporeally present with them throughout this period, nor that He was seen by them each day. He was visible and invisible, appeared in one form or another, according to His own pleasure. "At the sea of Tiberias." In John 6:1 we read, "The sea of Galilee, which is the sea of Tiberias," the latter being its Roman name. In Matthew 28:10 we learn that the risen Savior had said to the women at the sepulcher, "Go tell my brethren that they go into Galilee, and there shall they see me." This, then,

explains the presence of the seven disciples here in Galilee. Where the other four were, and why they had not yet arrived, we do not know. But it seems clear that these seven had no business there at the sea, for Matthew 28:16 distinctly says, "The eleven disciples went away into Galilee, into a mountain where Jesus had appointed them." It looks very much as though Peter was restless, and while waiting the coming of the other apostles he said, "I go a fishing"—to the last we see his energetic nature at work. Others have suggested that the reason they went a fishing was in order that they might obtain food for a meal, and possibly this did supply an additional motive—cf. John 21:12. "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" (John 21:2). Peter being mentioned first intimates that the enumeration here is the order of grace. "Thomas" occupying the second place in the list is a further indication of this. The removal of his doubts had restored the Eleven to unity of faith, and prepared them for mutual fellowship again. "There were together Simon Peter and Thomas," which is a beautiful contrast from John 20:24—"But Thomas was not with them!" Thomas is named next to Peter, as if he now kept closer to the meetings of the apostles than ever. "It is well if losses by our neglect make us more careful afterwards not to let opportunities slip" (Matthew Henry). Of "Nathanael" we read elsewhere only in John 1:45-51: probably he is the "Bartholomew" of Matthew 10:3. Next come the "sons of Zebedee," emphasizing their fishermen-character. This is the only place where John does not refer to himself as "the disciple whom Jesus loved": the absence of this expression here being in full accord with the fact that it is the order of grace which is before us. Who the other two disciples were we are not told. "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" (John 21:3). That Peter is here seen taking the lead is in full accord with what we read elsewhere of his impulsive and impetuous nature. Most of the commentators consider that the disciples were fully justified in acting as they did on this occasion. But the Lord had not given them orders to fish for any but men. It seems to us, therefore, that they were acting according to the promptings of nature. The fact that it was night-time also suggests that they were not walking as children of light. Nor did the Lord appear to them during that night: they were left to themselves! The further fact that they "caught nothing" is at least a warning hint that servants of the Lord cannot count on His blessing when they choose the time and place of their labors, and when they run, unsent. These beloved disciples had to be taught in their own experience, as we all have to be, the truth which the Lord had enunciated just before His death—"Without me, ye can do nothing" (John 15:5); not, a little, but nothing! The further fact that we are told, "They went forth, and entered into a ship immediately" as soon as Peter had said, "I go a fishing," instead of first looking to God for guidance, or weighing what Peter had said, supplies further evidence that the whole company was acting in the energy of the flesh—a solemn warning for each of God's servants to wait on the Lord for their instructions instead of taking them from a human leader! "But when the morning was now come, Jesus stood on the shore: but the disciples knew not that it was Jesus" (John 21:4). The "But" here adds further confirmation to what we have said above on John 21:3. That these disciples now failed to recognize the Savior indicates that their spiritual faculties were not then in exercise. It seems evident that they were not expecting Him. And how often He draws near to us and we know it not! And how often our acting in the energy of the flesh and following the example of human leaders is the cause of this! In the Greek, the dosing words of this verse are identical with those found at the end of John 20:14: "and [Mary] knew not that it was Jesus." She was immersed in sorrow, occupied with death, and she recognized not the Savior. These men had returned to their worldly calling, and were occupied with their bodily needs and recognized Him not. Surely these things are written for our learning! "Then Jesus saith unto them, Children, have ye any meat? They answered him, No" (John 21:5). Our Lord's form of address here is also searchingly suggestive. He did not use the term of endearment

employed in John 13:33, "Little children," but employed the more general form of salutation, which the margin renders "Sirs." He spoke not according to the intimacies of love, but as from a distance—a further hint from the Spirit as to how we are to interpret John 21:2, 3. But why did He ask: "Have ye any meat?" He knew, of course, that they had none; what, then, was the purpose of His enquiry? Was it not designed to draw from them a confession of their failure, ere He met their need? And is not this ever His way with His own? Before He furnishes the abundant supply, we must first be made conscious of our emptiness. Before He gives strength, we must be made to feel our weakness. Slow, painfully slow, are we to learn this lesson; and slower still to own our nothingness and take the place of helplessness before the Mighty One. The disciples on the sea picture us, here in this world; the Savior on the shore (whither we are bound) Christ in Heaven. How blessed, then, to behold Him occupied with us below, and speaking to us from "the shore!" It was not the disciples who addressed the Lord, but He who spoke to them! "And He said unto them, Cast the net on the right side of the ship, and ye shall find" (John 21:6). How this evidences the Deity of the One here speaking to these disciples! He knew on which side of the ship the net should be cast. But more, did it not show them, and us, that He is sovereign of the sea? These men had fished all their lives, yet had they toiled throughout that night and taken nothing. But here was the Lord telling them to cast their net but once, and assuring them they should find. Was it not He, by His invisible power, that drew the fishes into their net! And what a striking line is this picture of Christian service. How He tells the servants that success in their ministry is due not to their eloquence, their power of persuasion, or their any thing, but due alone to His sovereign drawing-power. A most blessed foreshadowment did the Savior here give the apostles of the Divine blessing which should rest upon their labors for Him. In full and striking accord with this was the fact that the Lord bade them "Cast the net on the right side of the ship"—cf. Matthew 25:34: "Then shall the king say unto them on his right hand, Come, ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world!" "They cast, therefore, and now they were not able to draw it for the multitude of fishes" (John 21:6). This is very striking. The Lord was a hundred yards away from them (John 21:8), yet they heard plainly what He said. Again: He was, so far as their recognition of Him at the moment, an entire stranger to them. Moreover, notwithstanding the fact that they had fished all night and caught nothing, and had already drawn up the net into the boat, as being useless to prolong their efforts; nevertheless, they now promptly cast it into the sea again. How strikingly this demonstrated once more the power of the Word—in making them hear His voice, in overcoming whatever scruples they may have had, in moving their hearts to prompt obedience. Verily, "all power in heaven and in earth" is His. In the abundant intake the disciples were taught that in "keeping his commandments there is great reward" (Ps. 19:11). And what a lesson for those who seek to serve: His it is to issue orders, ours to obey—unmurmuringly, unquestioningly, promptly. "Therefore that disciple whom Jesus loved saith unto Peter, It is the Lord" (John 21:7). This is in perfect keeping with what we read elsewhere about John—the most devoted of the apostles, he possessed the most spiritual discernment. He was the one who leaned on the Master's breast at the supper, and to whom the Lord communicated the secret of the betrayer's identity (John 13:23-26). He was the one that was nearest to the cross, and to whose care the Savior committed His mother (John 19:26, 27). He it was who was the first of the Eleven to perceive that the Lord had risen from the dead (John 20:8). So here, he was the first of the seven to identify the One on the shore. How perfectly harmonious are the Scriptures! "The tenderest love has the first and surest instincts of the object beloved" (Stier). And what a lesson is here again for the Lord's servants: when He grants success to our labors, when the Gospel-net in our hands gathers fishes, let us not forget to own "It is the Lord!" To how much more may and should this principle be applied. As we admire the beauties of nature, as we observe the orderliness of her laws, as we receive countless mercies and blessings every day, let us say "It is the Lord!" So, too, when our plans go awry, when

disappointment, affliction, persecution comes our way, still let us own "It is the Lord!" It is not blind chance which rules our lives, but the One who died for us on the cross. "Now when Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he girt his fisher's coat unto him (for he was naked) and did cast himself into the sea" (John 21:7). This was in full keeping with Peter's character: if John was the first to recognize Christ, Peter was the first to act! Nor do we believe that it was mere impulsiveness which prompted him—his collectedness in first girding himself with the outer garment makes decisively against such a superficial conclusion. Peter, too, was devoted to Christ, deeply so, and it was love which here made him impatient to reach Christ. Peter's action makes us recall that night on the stormy sea when the Savior walked on the waves toward the ship in which the disciples were. Peter it was, then, who said unto the Lord, "Bid me come unto thee on the water" (Matthew 14:28), for he could not wait for his Beloved to reach him. Beautiful it is now to observe that there was no reserve about Peter. In the interval between Matthew 14 and John 21, he had basely denied his Master; but in the interval, too, and after the denial, he had heard His "Peace be unto you," and, plainly, this reassuring word had been treasured up in his heart. Observe that Peter left the net full of fishes for Christ, like the Samaritan woman who left her waterpot. The "girding" of himself evidences the deep reverence in which he held the Savior! "And the other disciples came in a little ship (for they were not far from the land, but as it were two hundred cubits) dragging the net with fishes" (John 21:8). Love does not act uniformly; it expresses itself differently, through various temperaments. John did not jump out of the ship, though he was equally devoted as Peter, nor did the other five. The six remained in the skiff or punt which usually accompanied the large fishing vessels, so as to draw the net full of fishes safely to land; illustrating the fact that faithful evangelists will not desert those who have been saved under their preaching, but will labor with them, care for them, and do all in their power to ensure their safely reaching the shore. The parenthetical remark seems to be brought in here to emphasize the miraculous character of this catch of fish, and to teach us that sometimes converts to Christ will be found in the most unlikely places—the net was cast close in to the shore! "As soon then as they were come to land, they saw a fire of coals there, and fish laid thereon, and bread" (John 21:9). This is most blessed. It illustrates once more the precious truth that Jesus Christ is "the same yesterday, and to-day and forever." Even in His resurrection-glory He was not unmindful of their physical needs. Ever thoughtful, ever compassionate for His own, the Savior here showed His toiling disciples that He cared for their bodies as well as their souls: "For he knoweth our frame; he remembereth that we are dust" (Ps. 103:14). We doubt not that this provision of His was miraculously produced: the fire, the fish on it, and the bread by its side, were the creations of Him who has but to will a thing and it is done. It is surely significant that the food which Christ here provided for the disciples was of the same variety as that with which He had fed the hungry multitude close by the same sea. The fish and the bread would doubtless recall the earlier miracle to the minds of the apostles. "They saw a fire of coals there, and fish laid thereon, and bread." What is the deeper significance of this? First, it tells us of the Lord's care for His servants, and is the concrete pledge that He will supply all their need. Second, the Lord has left us an example to follow: if the Son of God condescended to spread this table for His children after their night of toil, let us not think it beneath us to take loving forethought whenever we have the opportunity of ministering to the physical comfort of His servants: even a cup of water given in His name will yet be rewarded. Third, it signifies that in the midst of laboring for others, our own souls need warming and feeding—a lesson which many a servant of God has failed to heed. Fourth, the fact that there were fish already on the fire before the disciples drew their full net to land, intimates that the Lord is not restricted to the labors of His servants, but that He can and does save souls altogether apart from human instrumentality—another thing we need to take to heart these days when man is so much magnified. Finally, does not this gracious provision of Christ forecast the refreshment and satisfaction which will be ours when our toiling on the troublous sea of this world shall be

ended, and we are safely landed on the Heavenly shore! "Jesus saith unto them, Bring of the fish which ye have now caught" (John 21:10). "In this verse our Lord calls on the disciples to bring proof that, in casting the net at His command, they had not labored in vain. It was the second word that He spake to them, we must remember, on this occasion. The first saying was, 'Cast the net on the right side of the ship, and ye shall find.' The second saying was, 'Bring of the fish which ye have now caught,' with a strong emphasis on the word 'now.' I believe our Lord's object was to show the disciples that the secret of success was to work at His command, and to act with implicit obedience to His word. It is as though He had said, 'Draw up the net, and see for yourselves how profitable it is to do what I tell you.' Fish for food they did not want now, for it was provided for them. Proof of the power of Christ's blessing, and the importance of working under Him was the lesson to be taught, and as they drew up the net they would learn it" (Bishop Ryle). This also is in full accord with the fact that the practical teaching of this chapter is instruction upon service. "Bring of the fish which ye have now caught." Is there not also a spiritual hint in this verse? The "fish" symbolize the souls which the Lord enables His servants to gather in. In bidding them bring of the fish to Him, He intimated they would have fellowship together, not only in laboring, but also in enjoying the fruits of it! It reminds us of His words in John 4:36: "He that reapeth receiveth wages, and gathereth fruit unto life eternal: that both he that soweth and he that reapeth may rejoice together." The Lord delights in sharing His joy with us. Beautifully is this brought out again in Luke 15:6: "When he cometh home, he calleth together his friends and neighbors, saying unto them, Rejoice with me; for I have found my sheep which was lost." How marvelous the grace which here said to the disciples: "Bring of the fish which ye have now caught?" "Simon Peter went up and drew the net to land full of great fishes, an hundred and fifty and three; and for all there were so many, yet was not the net broken" (John 21:11). Peter drew the net to land: how remarkable is this in view of what is said in John 21:6: "They were not able to draw it for the multitude of fishes." Surely this points another important lesson in connection with service. What six men had been unable to do in their own strength, one man now did when he went to his work from the feet of Christ! Peter was weaker than gossamer thread when he followed his Lord afar off; but in His presence, a sevenfold power came upon him! A similar example is found in Judges 6:14: "The Lord looked upon him [Gideon] and said, Go in this thy might." The place of strength is still at the feet of the Savior, and strength will be imparted exactly in proportion as we are in conscious fellowship with Him and drawing from His infinite fullness. "He giveth power to the faint; and to them that have no might he increaseth strength. Even the youths shall faint and be weary, and the young men shall utterly fail; but they that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run, and not be weary; and they shall walk, and not faint" (Isa. 40:29-31). How much each of us need to heed that word, "Wait on the Lord, be of good courage, and he shall strengthen thine heart; wait, I say, on the Lord" (Ps. 27:14). How lamentable, and how humbling, that we are so slow to avail ourselves of the unfailing strength which is to be found in Him; found for the feeblest who will wait on Him in simple faith and earnest entreaty. "Simon Peter went up, and drew the net to land full of great fishes, an hundred and fifty and three; and for all there were so many, yet was not the net broken." There are two details here upon which the ingenuity of many have been freely exercised: the number of the fish, and the not breaking of the net. There is little room to doubt that Peter would recall the miraculous draught of fishes on a former occasion, when the net did break (Luke 5). On that occasion the miracle was followed by the Lord saying unto Simon, "From henceforth thou shalt catch men." There it is the work of the evangelist which is in view, and therefore there is no numbering, for it is impossible for him to count up those who are saved under his Gospel message. Following this second miraculous draught, the Lord said unto Simon, "Feed my sheep." Here it is the work of the pastor or teacher which is in view, and hence there is numbering, for he ought to be able to determine which are sheep and which are goats. In the former the net breaks, for though many profess

to believe the Gospel, yet few really do so to the saving of their souls. In the latter, the net breaks not, for none of the elect (the "right" side of the ship) shall perish. As for the spiritual meaning of the numbering of the fish here, observe that they were not counted till the end, not in John 21:6, but in John 21:11; not while in the ship, but after "the land" is reached! Not till we come to Heaven shall we know the number of God's elect! "Jesus saith unto them, Come and dine" (John 21:12). How beautifully this evidenced the fact that He was still the same loving, gracious, condescending One as in the days of His humiliation! The disciples were not kept at a distance. They were invited to draw near, and partake of the provision which His own compassion had supplied. So He still says to the one who responds to His knocking, "I will come in to him and sup with him, and he with me" (Rev. 3:20). Here for the last time we hear His blessed and familiar "Come." "Come" not "Go." He did not send them away, but invited them to Himself. "And none of the disciples durst ask him, Who art thou? knowing that it was the Lord" (John 21:12). "This statement is by no means to be understood as implying any doubt, but on the contrary a full persuasion that it was Christ Himself. Yet may we infer from it the change which had passed upon Him, and the awe which possessed them, after His resurrection. He was the same, and yet not the same. There was so much of His former appearance as to preclude doubtfulness; there was so much of change as to prevent all curious and carnal questioning. They sat down to the meal in silence, wondering at, while at the same time they well knew, Him Who was thus their Host" (Mr. G. Brown). It was reverence for Him which suppressed their inquiries. "Jesus then cometh, and taketh bread, and giveth them, and fish likewise" (John 21:13). As Master of the feast, as Head of the family he now dispensed His mercies. But we may observe that no longer does the Lord give thanks before meat with His guests, as formerly He did (John 6:11). Then, it was as the perfect Man, the Servant ministering, that He gave thanks to God, with and for and before them all, for what God had given them: but now, as God, He Himself gives, and requires them to recognize Him as the Lord. There, it was His humanity which was the more prominent; here, His Deity. Yet how unspeakably blessed to observe that this One who is now "crowned with glory and honor" was still their Minister, caring for them! Not only was this the emblem of that spiritual fellowship which it is our unspeakable privilege to enjoy with Christ even now, but also the pledge of the future relations which will exist. Even in a coming day "He will 'gird' Himself, and make them to sit down to meat, and will come forth and serve them" (Luke 12:37). He will yet give us to "eat of the tree of life" (Rev. 2:7), and of the "hidden manna" (Rev. 2:17). "This is now the third time that Jesus showed himself to his disciples, after that he was risen from the dead" (John 21:14). This does not mean that the Lord made but three appearances in all, but the third that John was led to record: the other two he mentions, are found in chapter 20. It should be remembered that during the "forty days" of Acts 1, which intervened between His resurrection and ascension, Christ did not consort with His disciples as before, but only showed Himself to them occasionally. It is deeply interesting to compare the record found in Luke 5 of the earlier miraculous draught of fishes; there are a number of comparisons and contrasts. Both took place at the sea of Galilee; both were preceded by a night of fruitless toil; both evidenced the supernatural power of Christ; both were followed by a commission to Peter. But in the former, the Lord was in the ship; here, on the shore: in the one the net broke, in the other it did not: the one was at the beginning of Christ's public ministry; the latter, after His resurrection: in the former, Peter's commission was to fish for "men"; in the latter, to feed Christ's "sheep"; in the one the number of fishes is not given; in the latter it is. The following questions are to aid the student on our final section:— 1. Why after "they had dined" did Christ speak, verse 15? 2. Why did Christ ask Peter verse 15? 3. What is the difference between Peter's three commissions, verses 15, 16, 17? 4. What is meant by grieved, verse 17? 5. Why did Peter turn around, verse 20? 6. What should Christ's rebuke teach us, verse 22? 7. What is the force of verse 25?

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