

# BREAKFAST BY THE SEA

by Ray C. Stedman

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The expression, "By hook or by crook," you may be surprised to learn, originated from the 21st chapter of the Gospel of John. A hook is the symbol of a fisherman, while a crook is the symbol of a shepherd. Here then in this chapter are symbolized the two ministries of the church: fishing and shepherding. That is how the work of God goes forward.

The scene is the Sea of Galilee, to which the disciples have come in obedience to the word of Jesus to Mary Magdalene after he rose from the dead, "Go and tell my disciples that I go before them to Galilee. There I will appear to them." John now picks up the account in these opening words.

**After this Jesus revealed himself again to the disciples by the Sea of Tiberias; and he revealed himself in this way. Simon Peter, Thomas called the Twin, Nathanael of Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two others of his disciples were together. 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. {John 21:1-3 RSV}**

These are my kind of fishermen! Much of the fishing in the Sea of Galilee was done at night in those days as it is yet today. Fishermen used torches to attract the fish to the boat and then netted them. But although they were expert fishermen, the disciples had labored throughout the night and had caught nothing. That must have been a rather unusual experience for them. Yet as this account makes clear, it was the Lord's intention that they catch nothing on this occasion.

Here in that beautiful symbolic way that John frequently employs we have a picture of what Jesus wants to teach us about the work of fishing for men. Failure is a very demoralizing thing. Some of you have tried hard to accomplish something. Like these fishermen, you have expended much energy and utilized all your resources but gained nothing in return. But although failure is a painful experience, valuable lessons can be gained through it.

Here is what one writer said about this failed night of fishing:

The night of failure was not without its lessons and its benefits. We can do worse than fail. We can succeed and be proud of our success. We can succeed and burn incense to the net. We can succeed and forget the Hand whose it is to give or to withhold, to kill or to make alive.

People who think they have done it all themselves are common today. Every now and then I meet someone who claims to be a "self-made man." I have discovered, however, that most self-made men worship their creator! Yet nothing is more revealing of human ignorance than the claim to be a self-made man. That is to take for granted all that has been provided for them all throughout their lives, without giving a thought for Who provided it. Yet, were it not for God's providing hand, we would have neither the opportunities nor the resources to begin with. The writer continues,

Success -- yes, even spiritual success -- can be a snare and a ruin, while failure can be an unspeakable benefit. Failure is often the only test by which the real worth and quality of a man or woman can be tried. It is in failure that a man begins to think, to wonder whence his failure comes, to look around and seek for the reasons, to put into his work double watchfulness and double energy, and to look upwards to Him who can turn failure into a glorious achievement.

John goes on to show what God can do with a night of failure.

**Just as day was breaking, Jesus stood on the beach; yet the disciples did not know that it**

was Jesus. Jesus said to them, "Children, have you any fish?" They answered him, "No." He said to them, "Cast the net on 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, for the quantity of fish. That disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, "It is the Lord!" When Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he put on his clothes, for he was stripped for work, and sprang into the sea. But the other disciples came in the boat, dragging the net full of fish, for they were not far from the land, but about a hundred yards off. {John 21:4-8 RSV}

Some of the commentators insist that this was a natural occurrence, that as he stood on the shore, Jesus could see what the disciples in the boat could not see. But I question that. One hundred yards is a considerable distance. Besides, the early light of dawn would make it even more difficult to see into the waters from the shore. This is not a miracle so much as it is a supernatural exercise of power through natural means. There is no question that our Lord summoned these fish to be there -- and fish, unlike men, obey their Lord!

This was a sign to the apostles that the Lord was at work, and they recognized him. When this stranger bid them drop their net on the right side of the boat and it was immediately filled with fish, their minds must have leaped back to another occasion when upon his command they let down their nets and they caught so many fish the nets broke. John, who understands more quickly than Peter, said, "It is the Lord!" while Peter, who acts more quickly than John, wrapped his robe around him, leaped into the sea and swam ashore. All of this is recounted by John so that we might see what the Lord wants us to learn about the work of fishing.

The meaning behind this follows in the next verses.

**When they got out on land, they saw a charcoal fire there, with fish lying on it, and bread. Jesus said to them, "Bring some of the fish that you have just caught." So Simon Peter went aboard and hauled the net ashore, full of large fish, a hundred and fifty-three of them; and although there were so many, the net was not torn. Jesus said to them, "Come and have breakfast." Now none of the disciples dared ask him, "Who are you?" They knew it was the Lord. Jesus came and took the bread and gave it to them, and so with the fish. This was now the third time that Jesus was revealed to the disciples after he was raised from the dead. {John 21:9-14 RSV}**

Several things here have parallels in the work of fishing for men. Notice that Jesus supplied the original fish and bread for this breakfast. When the disciples landed, the charcoal fire was already lit, and fish and bread were lying there. This is indicative that all that we have come from the hand of God. We did not provide this world or the food that is in it. We do not provide the opportunities that come our way. Many of them come to us right out of the blue. Behind all of this the hand of God has already been at work. He has already put us in the right place, leading us into situations we could never have designed ourselves. We operate by his grace and according to his efforts.

But notice that Jesus then invites the disciples to bring the fish they have caught. This beautifully suggests the way God works with man. As I read through the Scriptures I am continually astonished at the privilege given us by God of being co-laborers with him. Human labor was involved in almost all of the miracles of Jesus. For instance, our Lord multiplied the bread and fish which the boy had to feed the multitude, but he first sent the disciples searching through the crowd to see what they could supply. The wonder of this is that God, who could easily do it all himself, nevertheless gave them the great privilege of being co-workers with him.

What he invites you to do may be a very simple thing. You may have opportunity to invite your neighbors in for a cup of coffee and share your faith with them. While that may seem an insignificant thing now, when history has come to an end and we are all gathered on the shore with Jesus this may well become the greatest thing you have ever done. We will see ourselves as tremendously privileged to have worked with God in what he was doing in this world.

The media may give the impression that the important things are happening in Washington and the world capitals, but that is not so. I was in Washington last week and I was not impressed by what was happening in politics there. The spreading of the word of truth, the opening of people's eyes to the realities of life, the understanding of our humanity, laboring with God to put aside the destructive, dehumanizing forces of earth --

that is the work that is important and exciting in this day. We are privileged to be invited to partake with him in that task.

John reports that there were exactly 153 fish caught in the net. Almost all the commentators agree that John has a reason for giving the number. Some of the guesses as to what that number means, however, are amazing, to say the least. One man said it probably indicated that 153 A.D. was a very important year. I have never been able to find out anything unusual about that year, however. Another suggested that the number 100 stood for the Gentiles, the largest number, 50 stood for the Jews, because they are only half as important, or as many, and 3 stands for the Trinity. Another obviously mathematically-minded commentator added the numbers from 1 through 17 and found they added up to 153, but he failed to say what was the significance of that!

The most likely answer, as some commentators say, is the suggestion of Jerome, the early church father, who said that among the Greeks it was widely regarded that there were 153 kinds of fish in the sea. Modern science, of course, has discovered that there are many more species than that. If this was widely thought in that day, however, this was God's way of saying that the gospel is a universal gospel; it is for everybody, no matter what their background, color, culture, education, whatever. The same gospel is designed for men and women everywhere on earth. It has been true through all of history that wherever this wonderful word has spread it has never been found to be out of place. Once the artificial cultural barriers to understanding are removed the word of the gospel always speaks right to the human heart. No matter what kind of fish we may be dealing with they can be caught by the gospel net.

Here we see also that the work of fishing will bless the fisherman. As Jesus gathered these men on the shore he invited them to feast with him. While he fed them bread and fish they would have remembered the two occasions when he multiplied similar elements and fed multitudes, blessing them by providing for their physical hunger. Here it is the fishermen themselves who are blessed by the work of fishing.

But the main emphasis in this account is: success cannot occur without the recognition that the power of God is needed. This is not new truth. In Psalm 127 the psalmist said, "Except the Lord build the house, they labor in vain who build it. Except the Lord guard the city, the watchman watches in vain," {cf, Psa 127:1 KJV}. But it is very common in the church today to see people rely on strictly human methods, with no recognition of the fact that God must supply.

A week or so ago a group of men seemed to lose sight of the fact that, though they were engaged in a great enterprise, it would take more than human effort to bring it about. Because the human resources seemed to fail they lost faith and wanted to cancel the whole project. But God supplied in abundance -- as he had supplied the fish in this instance -- more than anybody anticipated, and the work went forward.

That is why this story is included here -- to teach us that in the work of evangelizing, whether through mass evangelism or individual witnessing, God himself is working with us and will supply far more than we ever dreamed.

John now turns to work of shepherding, with the word of Jesus to Peter.

**When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon, son of John, do you love me?" He said to him, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." He said to him, "Feed my lambs." A second time he said to him, "Simon, son of John, do you love me?" He said to him, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." He said to him, "Tend my sheep." He said to him the third time, "Simon, son of John, do you love me?" Peter was grieved because he said to him the third time, "Do you love me?" And he said to him, "Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Feed my sheep." {John 21:15-17 RSV}**

Clearly this account is designed to parallel the scene of Peter's three-time denial of Jesus. Several details of it are common to both accounts:

First, both took place beside a charcoal fire. It was while warming himself over a charcoal fire in the courtyard

of the high priest that Peter denied his Lord. Here, standing beside a charcoal fire supplied by Jesus himself, Peter is requested to affirm his love for his Lord.

Both of these accounts refer to Peter as "Simon Peter." Recall that when the Spirit of God uses the name "Simon" Peter, the natural Peter, the one with whom we feel a kinship, the Peter in us all, is in view.

Both in the incident in the courtyard and on this occasion on the beach, a three-fold statement is involved: three times Peter denied his Lord, and three times he is asked to affirm his love. As some commentators have pointed out, there are two words used for love: "agape," the love that is a decision one makes to commit oneself wholly to another for his benefit, and "phileo," which is affection, the love we naturally feel. That is the word Peter uses on all three occasions. Jesus uses the first word twice, and then descends to Peter's word.

Both of these refer to Peter's view of himself. Jesus asks him, "Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?" Here again the commentators have a guessing game as to what the word "these" refers to. Some have taken the words of Jesus to mean, "Do you love me more than these fish? Or these boats? Or this business of fishing?" But a comparison of these two accounts reveals that what he means is, "Do you love me more than these men love me?" Before he denied Jesus, Peter had inferred that he loved Jesus much more than they. "All men will forsake you, Lord, but I will lay down my life for you," he had said. Clearly he regards himself as more faithful and more committed than the others, whom he expected would desert the Lord in a time of danger. Thus Jesus addresses these words to him, "Do you love me more than these?"

Peter has learned some painful but necessary lessons. He does not judge himself in relationship to the others, but reads his own heart and replies, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." "Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you." He makes no mention of the others. Here is a great lesson on how we are to look at others. Peter indicates he has learned to read his Lord's mind better. In the Garden of Gethsemane he felt that his love for Jesus required that he assault the enemies of his Lord, but here he learns that he is responsible to feed the sheep of Jesus. That is the correct manifestation of love.

Here is the chief work of a shepherd. Jesus says to Peter, "Feed my lambs"; "Tend my sheep"; "Feed my sheep." Three aspects of feeding are suggested here:

"Feed my lambs." Teach the children. Do not wait for them to grow up. Teach children from the Word what life is all about.

Then, "Shepherd my sheep." The word means, watch over them, guard them. In Peter's first letter he says to the elders to whom he is writing, "Feed the flock of God which is among you, taking the oversight thereof, watching out for them," {cf, 1 Pet 5:2}. Try to discern where they are at, apprehend the coming dangers, warn and guard them. That is the work of a shepherd.

Finally, "Feed my sheep, my grown-up ones."

The instrument of feeding, of course, is the teaching of the Word of God. Open their minds to the thoughts of God. This is the missing element in the church today. As I have been traveling about, working with the Committee on Biblical Exposition, I have heard stated at several conferences, "The hungry sheep look up and are not fed." That is true of so many churches. One reason why immorality is invading our churches -- even preachers are throwing over their marriages and running off with the secretary -- is because the Word of God is not understood.

People are not thinking the thoughts of God, not looking at life the way God sees it, but following blindly after the fantasies and the illusions of the world. What is necessary is the unfolding of the mind of God in obedience to the word of Jesus: "Teach the word." The weakness of the church flows from a famine of the Word of God.

But it is more than teaching, as Jesus goes on to point out in a further word to Peter.

**"Truly, truly, I say to you, when you were young, you girded yourself and walked where you would; but when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and another will gird**

**you and carry you where you do not wish to go." (This he said to show by what death he was to glorify God.) And after this he said to him, "Follow me." {John 21:18-19 RSV}**

For Peter, following Jesus would involve more than teaching, it would ultimately involve pain, suffering, privation, and death. This was historically fulfilled.

Clearly this book was written after the death of Peter, as John records the way Peter would die. Eusebius, the church historian, tells us that when Peter went to Rome at the close of his life (by the way, he did not found the church at Rome at all; he went there much later), he was finally imprisoned, his hands were bound and he was led out to the place of execution, and there he was crucified. At his own request he was crucified upside down because he did not feel he was worthy to share the manner of his Lord's death.

Jesus is saying that preaching and teaching the Word of truth in a mixed-up world like ours will call for sacrifice. It may mean living in primitive conditions, under difficult circumstances, and not feeling put upon, but privileged, to teach and to suffer for the sake of the Word of God. Peter found this to be true. He ultimately obeyed his Lord. He had said, "I will lay down my life for you," and Jesus replied, "You will indeed, not like you once thought, not in defense of me with a sword, but in the teaching and preaching of the Word. Eventually you will lay down your life for me."

But one more thing is involved.

**Peter turned and saw following them the disciple whom Jesus loved, who had lain close to his breast at the supper and had said, "Lord, who is it that is going to betray you?" When Peter saw him, he said to Jesus, "Lord, what about this man?" Jesus said to him, "If it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you? Follow me!" The saying spread abroad among the brethren that this disciple was not to die; yet Jesus did not say to him that he was not to die, but, "If it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you?" {John 21:20-23 RSV}**

Here we have the problem of rivalry and competition in the church. The Gospels clearly indicate that Jesus eliminated competition as a motivation for Christian activity. But it is rare to find that in practice today. The church has followed the world in this regard, competing and struggling within itself, thereby diminishing its message, and often destroying its effectiveness. Jesus says we do not have to worry about what others are doing, but to be faithful to what God has given us to do; he will put it all together.

In a symphony orchestra a violinist will not go around checking what a trombonist is playing, nor will an oboist worry about whether a trumpeter will come in on time. That is the business of the conductor. These people play their parts and the conductor puts it all together.

This is how the church should operate. We are to fulfill the gifts God has given us. He will put it together. We are not in competition with anybody; we do not have to struggle for position. We each have been given a ministry, not only leaders, preachers and teachers, but to everyone has been given the gifts of the Spirit, and they define our ministry.

The twelfth chapter of First Corinthians beautifully indicates there are two things we must never say:

Because we have gifts given us by the Lord, we must never say to anybody, "I have no need of you," {1 Cor 12:21}. But how many times we hear that in the church: "We have no need of you. We can get along fine." I have heard churches boast that they had no need of any other church because they had adequate resources of their own. But that is not in accord with the mind of the Lord.

The second thing we must never say is, "You have no need of me. I am so ungifted, so poor, I have nothing to offer." You cannot say that. You have gifts which the Spirit of God has given to you and you alone. Thus we must not look at one another and ask, "Lord, what do you want to do with him?" Jesus' word is, "That is none of your business. Follow me. I will put it all together."

How simple, how beautiful that is! How effective the church would become if we would but return to it.

The last word here is for both the fisherman and the shepherd: We rest upon a reliable testimony.

**This is the disciple who is bearing witness to these things, and who has written these things; and we know that his testimony is true.**

**But there are also many other things which Jesus did; were every one of them to be written, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written. {John 21:24-25 RSV}**

These closing words were obviously written partly by John and partly by those who were associated with him, probably in Ephesus. It is John who writes, "This is the disciple who is bearing witness to these things, and who has written these things." That was his last word, his own eyewitness account of what Jesus said and did. But those who were associated with him (very likely the elders of the church there), picked up the pen and wrote, "...and we know that his testimony is true. But there are also many other things which Jesus did; were every one of them to be written, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written."

John had told them many other things which Jesus did that he did not include in his gospel, including some things that are not even included in the other gospels. If everything from this marvelous life of Jesus had been written, the accounts would have so intrigued men they would have endlessly written so that all the libraries of earth could not contain their books.

Could we with ink the ocean fill,  
And were the skies of parchment made,  
Were every stalk on earth a quill,  
And every man a scribe by trade,  
To write the love of God above  
Would drain the ocean dry.  
Nor could the scroll contain the whole,  
Though stretched from sky to sky.

What a marvelous life our Lord lived! Though we have been treated to only sections of it we have all we need, we have adequate testimony. "These things were written," John had said earlier, "that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, and believing, you may have life in his name." We have all we need, but it is not the whole story.

Yet another hymn sings of how we can rest upon this Word,

How firm a foundation,  
ye saints of the Lord,  
Laid for your faith  
in His excellent Word.

That is where John closes his account of the life of Jesus. Both the fisherman who does the work of an evangelist, and the shepherd, the teacher and pastor, the nurturer of faith -- whether that is a mother teaching her children in the home, a teacher in a home Bible class or an outreach ministry of any kind -- can rest upon the revelation of God in the Word of God. What a reliable testimony it is! Let us go forth to proclaim this word and fulfill our gifts in the ministry God has given us.

That is the most important thing in life -- to do what God has sent us here to do.

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