

John 21:1-14

Many scholars say that John 21 is an “Epilogue” to the main body of the gospel. And, for once, I agree with many scholars. 20:30-31 has a finality to it that leave 21 dangling outside the boundaries of the main body of the gospel. So what are we to make of 21? Why does “John” toss in one more chapter? I think he does it to address some issues concerning his identity and status in the early church. I also think he does it to further attack the view of the Docetics, who believed that Jesus only appeared human, but was really only a divine spirit. Regardless, there’s plenty here in John 21 to keep us busy for... 3 weeks! Let’s get to it!

21:1

Also known as the Sea of Galilee. I think we are told of the exact location to distance this from the previous scene, which took place in or near Jerusalem. The disciples have gone back home and, while they are all together, have gotten back to normal life.

21:2

What’s interesting to me is that we are told the disciples we have already met are there: Simon Peter, Nathanael (making his first appearance since chapter one), and Thomas. We have not been told who the Sons of Zebedee are in this gospel. (Elsewhere we can ascertain that they are James and John.) And, even more unknown, are the identities of the two nameless disciples. Who could these be? We are also not told why they are together, so making assumptions that they were doing the Great Commission or some other Christian venture is not wise. The author is quickly setting the stage for what is to come. In doing so, we should not read into the stage that is set; simply accept it and move on.

21:3

This probably wasn’t the recreational fishing trip. Peter was probably working the night shift. Interesting, though, is that the other disciples decide to join him when they otherwise would not have. Maybe there is something here about Christian community and “walking together”? The point is, they caught NOTHING. Odd. At least with the nets they were using you could expect a modicum collection of fish and other sea critters. But nothing? This is almost as miraculous as what happens next. This verse sets the reader at attention that something is up. (And, after finishing the lesson, you could come back here and make the point that Jesus is not only responsible for the large catch of fish but that he is also responsible for the zero-catch of fish experienced here. In all things, he is in control!)

21:4

Just like Mary did not recognize him in the tomb. The time of day and distance from shore make the disciples' inability to identify Jesus nothing extraordinary.

21:5

Why does Jesus call them "children"? Children have a father. Now, it could be that Jesus is making a veiled reference to his father being their father; a fact we have already been told. And this is very possibly the case. In fact, it would be hard to render an interpretation of this passage that does not have this as at least one of the meanings of the statement Jesus made. In addition to that, however, is also a possible interpretation that is more literal. The disciples are all underage men. They are, in fact, children. Would Jesus have called children to be his disciples? What do you think? (And keep in mind the coin Jesus told Peter to pull from the mouth of a fish to pay for both of their Temple Taxes... leaving open the possibility that the other disciples were not old enough (20) to have to pay that tax.)

21:6

The disciples do what Jesus tells them to do and their fortunes improve. It's tempting to want to allegorize this and quickly apply it to our lives: if we obey Jesus our fortunes will improve. And while this is very often the case, there are times when Jesus will ask us to leave the things and people we love and suffer for his name in ways we don't want to. (And I think we all have examples of things we did because we believe our Lord wanted us to do them, even though they were not what we wanted to do. Usually, it's been my experience, that rarely does nothing come from sacrifices/ decisions like this. Whereas when we make decisions based solely on what's best for us, often (it's been my experience) that we are left bored and disappointed with the outcome.)

21:7

We could have some fun with this disciple again. And I think we will. Back to the list of disciples. This disciple could be one of the sons of Zebedee (John or James) or it could be one of the unnamed disciples. So the possibility that Lazarus is one of the disciples is alive and well. It's still equally as possible that John and Lazarus are two names for the same person. OK, back to the main point here...

Jesus is identified not with being seen. (They saw him but it was not in seeing that he was recognized as Jesus; it was in the miraculous catch of fish.) Just as he was the first one to run into the tomb to see it empty, Simon Peter is the first one into the water. People are usually struck by Peter's impulsiveness. Why couldn't he have just waited the extra couple of minutes to turn the boat into shore instead of ruining a perfectly good outfit? But I don't think the author wants us to weigh time vs. cleanliness; Peter is leaving behind money. He's leaving behind a boat. He is leaving behind his friends. He is leaving behind everything he has to get to Jesus.

This verse is just one more arrow to the heart of the belief that our identity as Christians is somehow just a "part" of our lives, something we do on Sunday morning, or something that fits neatly into our organized and sanitized lives. It's not. Our identity in Christ comes before everything else, informs everything we do, and influences and directs our every move.

21:8

This verse sets the stage for what is to come. I don't think we are to be too hard on these disciples for not doing what Peter did. Rather, these details are included so that everyone is together for the following verses. This is a transition verse.

21:9

Usually attention is paid to the fish and the bread. And this is not a bad thing. After all, it reminds us of the miraculous feeding of the 5,000 with bread and fish. The Jesus who called to them from the boat and revealed himself in the miraculous catch of fish is the same Jesus who revealed himself in the miraculous feeding with fish.

But what caught my eye this time through was the reference to a charcoal fire. The only other time we came across a charcoal fire was back when Jesus was being tried by Annas and Caiaphas. Peter, in between his denials of Christ, warmed himself at a charcoal fire. The stage is set. Jesus is going to have something to do or say to Peter. No doubt the charcoal fire caught Peter's attention. Did Jesus know what he was saying in the courtyard of the high priest? And, if so, how will Jesus respond to a disciple who has denied him? (Kind of makes you want to keep reading, doesn't it?)

21:10

Why? Jesus already has food on the fire, probably ready to eat. Why bring more? We are not told. And we will not guess.

21:11

The fish were large. Let's say, 2 pounds each. 153 of them. Simon Peter is one strong dude! There has been a good deal written about the number 153. And while it's true that the author puts no detail in his gospel that isn't important, I think that the meaning and significance of 153 has been lost to us, although it would have been meaningful for his intended reader. Better to pass it over than make an educated guess about what it could mean.

Also, Peter brings up all of the fish that they had caught. He leaves nothing behind. He goes all-out for his Lord. (Compare this to Ananias and Sapphira in Acts, who held back a portion of the sale of property that they had promised to the Lord.)

That the net was not broken just goes to show that this was a supernatural event. We are led to believe that the net would not normally hold 153 large fish.

21:12

The disciples had learned to identify the Lord by what was going on around them. The question is: are we able to identify when and where we see Jesus working today? Jesus tells us (and yes, it's in another gospel) to "seek the kingdom," to identify when and where God is working in the world to undo the curse and make right what sin has made wrong. The question, again, for us is: are we able to identify when this happens?

21:13

This is the same thing Jesus did with the miraculous feeding of the multitude. He is the same Jesus, doing the same thing. We can take comfort from this because the Jesus we see in the Bible is the same Jesus who lives and reigns today. As the apostle writes: “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, and today, and forever.”

21:14

The author reminds us that this is the third time Jesus appeared to his disciples after he had been raised from the dead. In the words of the apostle: “he gave many convincing proofs that he was alive.” We do not need to doubt the historicity of the resurrection. Jesus was not shy about appearing to his disciples after he had been raised from the dead. I’ve got one question that’s been bugging me about this. Before his death, it appeared as though Jesus spend most of his time in the presence of his disciples: teaching, healing, etc. But now (and in Matthew and Luke as well), it seems as though Jesus spent most of his time away from his disciples and just popped in here and there to do this or that. What was he doing with the rest of his time before the ascension? (And no, I don’t expect an answer... I just think it’s interesting.)