



# FEED MY SHEEP

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## The symbolic meaning of 153 fish

### *Feed My Sheep, Part 2*

The setting is the sea of Galilee. The time is shortly after the resurrection of the Savior. Peter remarks to his fellow apostles and fishermen that he has seen the Lord only twice since His resurrection from the grave and he (Simon Peter) has no idea where He is now, so Peter says “I’m going fishing again.”

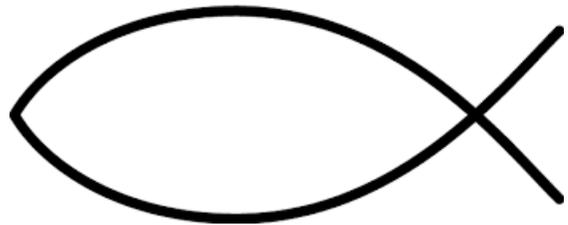
But remember, that at the very beginning of His ministry, as He was recruiting Peter, James and John, that the Lord had told Peter that “from henceforth thou shalt catch men.” (Luke 5:10) So although Peter is now determined to return to the fishing business, he’s not going to “get off the hook” that easily! (Pun intended.)

In the previous FMS, I took the liberty of dramatizing the first part of the story as told in the gospel of John, chapter 21. Now—post resurrection—just as at the beginning, the men had fished all night and caught nothing. The man on the shore (whom they had not yet recognized as the risen Jesus) tells them to drop their net on the right side of the boat. When they do, they haul in an enormous catch of 153 fish—big fish, not throwbacks. It was such a huge catch that it seems that they expected the net to break, but it did not.

I stated last month that this is all laden with symbolism which we would omit in order to get to the conversation between Jesus and Peter. And we shall get there. But I have changed my mind. Let’s discuss some of the symbolism. First, in both instances (Luke 5, at the beginning of the Lord’s public ministry; and John 21, at the post-resurrection appearance of the Lord), the apostles had been fishing all night and had caught nothing. I do not claim that my interpretation which follows

here is the only valid interpretation of this symbolism, but I do contend that it fits.

I see the two incidents (Luke 5 and John 21) as the bookends of the “church age,” the age of Pentecost, the past 2,000 years (give or take). Fish are symbolic of people in general. But note that from the beginning of the church age, the fish has been the symbol of Christianity, not of people in general.



Is there a contradiction here? Do fish symbolize *all* people or *only* Christians? We shall return to that in a moment. The past two millennia has been the Age of Pisces (Latin for “fish.”) We are now entering a new age, the Age of Aquarius. This is symbolized by a man with a water pitcher pouring out the water. Could this have anything to do with Jesus’ instructions to two of His disciples, telling them to look for a man bearing a water pitcher?

**Mark 14:13 And he sendeth forth two of his disciples, and saith unto them, Go ye into the city, and there shall meet you a man bearing a pitcher of water: follow him.**

Readers should realize that it would have been very unusual in those days to see a man bearing a water pitcher because that was customarily women’s work.

So, is this symbolically telling Christ's disciples (us today) to be looking for the Age of Aquarius? Disclaimer: we are not talking New Age mumbo-jumbo and astrology here, dear readers. We are talking about the truth of the gospel hidden in the star signs of which modern astrology is a weak, pale and false imitation of the real. For a treatise on this truth, order from us Ray Capt's wonderful book, *The Glory of the Stars*. (See flier enclosed with this mailing.)

The water being poured out in the coming age symbolizes the flood of the Holy Spirit about to encompass the earth!

Back to the fish symbol: Most Christians today would probably guess that the fish symbol stands for Christian believers. I maintain that it stands for all people in general. Why? Because of Jesus' teaching in the parable of the net found in Matthew 13.

**Matthew 13:47 Again, the kingdom of heaven is like unto a net, that was cast into the sea, and gathered of every kind:**

**48 Which, when it was full, they drew to shore, and sat down, and gathered the good into vessels, but cast the bad away.**

**49 So shall it be at the end of the world: the angels shall come forth, and sever the wicked from among the just,**

**50 And shall cast them into the furnace of fire: there shall be wailing and gnashing of teeth.**

Notice that caught in the net were *all* kinds (of people,) both good and bad. So how then did we come to believe that the fish stands for Christians only? My hunch is that it is a misunderstanding; that originally, it stood for the idea that those who were already believers were commissioned to likewise become fishers of men.

The fish was therefore a symbol of all people—the people “of every kind” who were *prospective* believers in Christ. Some would believe (in this age); others would not. The unbelievers will be cast “away,” into the “lake of fire,” or here, the “furnace of fire”—neither of which is eternal hell fire as the churches teach! It is the disciplinary fire of God's law which will be applied to them after their resurrection at the great white throne judgment (Revelation 20).

The Greek word for “fish” is *ichthys* (alternately, *ichthys*). In Greek: ΙΧΘΥΣ (*Ichthys*) is an acronym

and acrostic for Ἰησοῦς Χριστός, Θεοῦ Υἱός, Σωτήρ,” (*Iēsous Christos, Theou Yios, Sōtēr*), which translates into English as “Jesus Christ, Son of God, Savior.”

Notice that in both “fishing stories” (Luke 5 and John 21), that the apostles had fished *all night* and had caught nothing. And both times, it was *daylight* when, under the direct instruction of the Savior, they had tremendous catches. Historians speak of the Middle Ages as the Dark Ages, but in the context of the symbolism of these two fishing stories, the entire 2,000 years of the “church age” has been night.

I believe that the apostles literally had caught no fish all night. Symbolically, however, I believe that the “zero catch” is hyperbole to emphasize the contrast between the paucity of the catch during the “night” of the Pentecost church age, versus what will be the size of the catch in the coming age of Tabernacles. Everyone will be caught in the net! And this time, the net won't break!

The fact that the very specific number of 153 fish is given is enormously important! Most of the 17<sup>th</sup> to 20<sup>th</sup> century commentators belittle and scoff at the possibility that this number could have symbolic meaning. They state on their own authority that it should merely be understood as literal and that's all there is to it. But they do admit that many of the early church theologians believed that it *is* important symbolically.

As it turns out, the number 153 figures prominently in “sacred geometry,” I subject I have studied seriously for the past 20 years, both from the secular (and New Age) perspective and from the biblical perspective.

If you take all the numbers from 1 through 17 and add them up, you come up with 153. Seventeen is the number which symbolizes victory in the Bible.

The number 153 also figures prominently in Bible gematria. Gematria is when you convert words to numbers and vice versa. Because both the Hebrews and the Greeks used their alphabets as their numbering system; it follows, therefore, that every word in Hebrew or Greek has an equivalent number. For example, if we were to apply that in English, then a = 1, b = 2, c = 3, etc. So in the Greek language, alpha = 1, beta = 2, gamma = 3, and so forth. Similarly, in Hebrew,

aleph = 1, bet(h) = 2, gimel = 3, etc. In brief, the number 153 is symbolic of the “sons of God” because it is the gematrial sum in Hebrew of the words *beni ha elohim*, which translates to the “sons of God” (or more technically, “sons of the God.” Bonnie Gaunt has written about it and Ron Oja has discoursed at considerable length about the biblical significance of 153, as well as how the year 2,000 was a once-in-forever event because of the connection to the number 153...it is far too involved to even attempt to explain here.

The number 153—sons of God—represent the Overcomer Company, the Barley Company, the Firstfruits Company—terms all used synonymously here—referring to those who will receive immortality and incorruptibility at the first resurrection, an event mistakenly identified as “the rapture” by many Christian teachers and their flocks. It is only a small remnant of all believers who will be “the very elect,” those who will have been called to rule and reign with Christ in the Millennial Kingdom right here on the earth.

Let us move on now to the rest of the story in John 21. Our goal here is to get to shore, because by the time Pete and the boys get there, Jesus already has breakfast on the grill. It says he had fish and bread on a grill of coals of fire.

Back to (hopefully) humorous dramatization...So I’m thinking he was making walleye gyros (pronounced “year-ohs,”...or “jye-rows,” if you prefer to pronounce it incorrectly.) You know what they are, the pita wrap type of Greek bread. Just throw a little walleye fish between it, maybe add some tartar sauce or tzatziki sauce and you have grilled fish pita...um, ummm.

Anyhow, they get to shore and Jesus tells them to bring a few of the fish they had just caught and throw them on the grill as well, and thus He invites them to breakfast on the beach. Let us now pick of the story from the gospel.

**John 21:12 Jesus saith unto them, Come and dine. And none of the disciples durst ask him, Who art thou? knowing that it was the Lord.**

**13 Jesus then cometh, and taketh bread, and giveth them, and fish likewise.**

**14 This is now the third time that Jesus shewed himself to his disciples, after that he was risen from the dead.**

And now we come to the part of the story where we really want to focus our attention. This is a passage that we could call “the restoration of Peter,” but within it we will find some interesting uses of the Greek words for love, *phileo* and *agape*. I would encourage you to refresh your memory on the difference in meaning between those two Greek words as I outlined it last month.

We all know that Judas betrayed Jesus, and later in his remorse and despair, he went and hanged himself. But how much different was Peter’s sin than that of Judas?

Peter had been ordained an apostle just as Judas had, and Peter certainly forfeited his right to apostleship ever since the time he had denied the Lord. Calvin’s commentary in *the French language* actually says that like Judas, Peter had been deprived of the honor of apostleship “since he acted the part of a coward and a traitor.” In the same place, Calvin also said:

“That treacherous denial...had, undoubtedly, rendered him unworthy of the apostleship; for how could he be capable of instructing others in the faith, who had [himself so] basely revolted from it?”

Remember how Peter had bragged about his great faith and loyalty to the Lord Jesus? In fact, he did it several times. One was just after the last supper as they are heading out to the Mount of Olives and ultimately to the Garden of Gethsemane...

**Mark 14: 27 And Jesus saith unto them, All ye shall be offended [marginal translation: All ye shall be caused to fall away; caused to stumble] because of me this night: for it is written, I will smite the shepherd, and the sheep shall be scattered.**

**28 But after that I am risen, I will go before you into Galilee.**

**29 But Peter said unto him, Although all shall [stumble; fall away] be offended, yet will not I.**

**30 And Jesus saith unto him, Verily I say unto thee, That this day, even in this night, before the cock crow twice, thou shalt deny me thrice.**

**31 But he spake the more vehemently, If I should die with thee, I will not deny thee in any wise. Likewise also said they all.**

Well, we must conclude that although Calvin and almost everyone focuses on Peter’s denial that, in fact, they all pledged they would be faithful to the end.

How many were? But back to Peter...This is so typical of Simon Peter, isn't it? So rash, so impetuous, always getting his mouth in motion before his brain is in gear. Sounding so proud, so arrogant, so braggadocios. Pride goeth before a fall.

In John, chapter 18, they capture Jesus and take Him to the palace of the high priest. Now here is something really curious.

**John 18:15 And Simon Peter followed Jesus, and so did another disciple: that disciple was known unto the high priest, and went in with Jesus into the palace of the high priest.**

Did you ever notice that before? That one of Jesus' disciples went in with Him into the palace of Caiaphas, the high priest? But Peter had to wait outside.

**16 But Peter stood at the door without. Then went out that other disciple, which was known unto the high priest, and spake unto her that kept the door, and brought in Peter.**

Did you ever wonder who that unnamed disciple was? Some have speculated that since this gospel-writer, John, several times refers to himself in the third person, that it must have been him. I disagree because John was a Galilean just like the rest of the apostles (except Judas) and unless you had connections, you didn't just waltz into the high priest's palace. Galileans like Peter and John were simple nobodies, fishermen, who didn't have the clout to get invited into this palace.

John reports here that this other disciple did have the connections. He was acquainted with the high priest, and he had enough clout not only to get himself in to watch the proceedings against Jesus, but he was able to get Peter in the door as well. We notice also that the unnamed one is referred to as a *disciple*, not an apostle. All the apostles were disciples, but not all disciples were apostles. So while it is admittedly speculation on my part, I would suggest it might have been Joseph of Arimathea.

It probably was not Nicodemus since we know that he kept his relationship with Jesus secret. Joseph, on the other hand—being the equivalent in the Roman Empire of a modern major defense contractor—was such a wealthy and politically powerful individual that

he *could* request a favor of the high priest. In any event, Peter gets in the door and no sooner does he walk in but that he is immediately recognized as a follower of Jesus.

**17 Then saith the damsel that kept the door unto Peter, Art not thou also *one* of this man's disciples? He saith, I am not.**

**18 And the servants and officers stood there, who had made a fire of coals; for it was cold: and they warmed themselves: and Peter stood with them, and warmed himself.**

Here I believe John was inspired to catch the connection and use it as a literary device. I am speaking of the fact that there is noted here the fire of coals and then likewise at the beach in John 21, remember how I told you Jesus already had the grill going for breakfast? Look in verse...

**John 21:9 As soon then as they were come to land, they saw a fire of coals there, and fish laid thereon, and bread.**

You see, it connects the two passages: first, Peter's fall and denial and in the second instance, his restoration to apostleship by the Lord. Back to the scene at the palace...

**John 18:25 And Simon Peter stood and warmed himself. They said therefore unto him, Art not thou also *one* of his disciples? He denied *it*, and said, I am not.**

**26 One of the servants of the high priest, being *his* kinsman whose ear Peter cut off, saith, Did not I see thee in the garden with him?**

**27 Peter then denied again: and immediately the cock crew.**

Oops! Out of space this month. (See what happens when I digress to explain the symbolism? ☺ To be continued.)

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