

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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THE GREAT FISHER

We need to remember when reading the Bible that people like the disciples were in a very real sense just that—people, very common people (a point that is emphasized in Acts 4:13). Like the rest of us, they also experienced frustration, annoyance and irritation on occasion. Foul moods, as we call them, happen to all imperfect people—and the disciples were no different than the rest of us. There were times when the disciples even displayed less than perfect attitudes toward Jesus. The fishermen of Galilee had much to learn. They had indeed taken the first step as disciples. They were simple believers. This event (Luke 5:1 - 11) takes place *after* the first call to be disciples (Matthew 4:18 ff., Mark 1:16 ff.). Special mention is made of Peter, Andrew, James, and John. They had followed Jesus, but not, so it seems, in a complete and unconditional manner, since they were still engaged in their trade as fishermen. Now, however, Jesus issues a call to become *permanent* disciples.¹ There are three important elements to be noted in this call: First, the call comes *after* the open breach with the Jewish authorities. This would involve the disciples in persecution. Second, it necessitated the abandonment of all former occupations and even the severance of earthly ties. Third, this call was unlike that of any other Rabbi in Israel. It involved common elements of discipleship, e.g., learning doctrine, life style commitment—but it involved more—the call to become co-workers.²

I. THE SCENE

It is early morning, on the shore of the lake Gennesaret³ near Capernaum (the hometown of Simon Peter, Cf. Luke 4:31 - 39). As the result of Jesus' growing reputation a large crowd gathered to hear His teaching. Peter, Andrew, John, and James were among the fishermen who were cleaning their nets after a long night of fishing.⁴ In order to address the pressing crowd, Jesus asks Simon Peter for use of his boat. Then with the boat serving as His platform, He teaches the crowd clustered upon the shore.

II. THE INSTRUCTION

Having finished His teaching, Jesus turns to a tired and weary Simon Peter and instructs him to launch out to deeper water and let down the nets. Note the attitude of Simon.

- A. Simon's Protest: "We toiled all night." The word "toiled" is KOPIASANTES, from the verb KOPOS, which means 'wasting, tiring, spending, labor'. It signifies when one lies down exhausted at the end of one's work. To make matters worse, the hard work produced nothing.
- B. Simon's Reluctance: "Master . . . nevertheless, at Thy word"—the word "Master" (used only by Luke in the N.T. and always in reference to Christ, cf. 8:24, 45; 9:33, 49; 17:13) is EPISTATA. It is a Greek term used primarily for Gentile readers instead of "Rabbi".⁵ The use of this term indicates Simon's acquiescence to Christ's authority—but his words betray the fact that he has no confidence whatsoever in the wisdom of Christ's command—there is a hint of frustration in Simon's words.

NOTE: This scene has been captured best by R. C. Sproul. It is as if Simon said, "Look Jesus, you are a marvelous teacher. Your sermons keep us all spellbound. There is no greater theologian than you. In matters of religion you confound us all. But please, give us a little bit of credit. We are professionals. We know the fishing business. We have been out there all night and nothing—zilch. The fish just aren't running. Let's go home and go to bed and try our luck later. But if you insist, if we must humor you, then, of course we will let down the nets." I can see Simon Peter exchanging a knowing glance with Andrew and muttering some obscenity under his breath as he hoisted the nets that he had just cleaned and threw them overboard. He must have been thinking to himself, "Blasted preachers! They're all alike. They think they know everything."⁶

III. THE SIGN

The catch was enormous, so much so that the nets began to break (DIERESSETO) the imperfect form, stressing that the nets *began* to snap. Once they pulled the load of fish into the boats the amount was so great that the danger of sinking alarmed the fishermen. Some have argued that this really was not a miracle, Jesus just happened to see a large school of fish and quickly ordered Peter to drop the nets. The effect on Simon, however, refutes this interpretation. Rather, what we see here is Christ as the Lord of nature, exercising His dominion as the Son of Man over the creation (Hebrews 2:5 - 9; compare with Psalm 8:6 - 8).

IV. THE RESULTS

Although Simon is center stage in what follows, the text declares that all that were with him were "seized (PERIESCHEN, to encompass or seize—like fish in a net!) with amazement" (THAMBOS, literally "for a wonder held him round"⁷).

- A. Simon's Peter's Confession: What is the import of the words "I am a sinful man"? G. Campbell Morgan

argues that first and foremost this has reference to Peter's failing to fully follow Jesus. He had been called earlier and yet had gone back to fishing.⁸ Perhaps, but I am inclined to see Peter's confession in a different light. We meet with similar reaction when people in the O.T. are brought into the presence of God, such as Abraham (Genesis 18:27), Job (Job 42:6), or Isaiah (Isaiah 6:5). As H. P. Liddon demonstrated, Peter's act was an, *act of worship*, and this is only given to God.⁹ Warfield concurs and writes, "There seems to be an ascription of Jesus of a majesty which is distinctly recognized as supernatural; not only is the contrast of 'Lord' with 'Master' here expressed (cf. v. 5), but the phrase 'Depart from-me; for I am a sinful man' (v. 8) is the natural utterance of that sense of unworthiness which overwhelms men in the presence of the divine, and which is signalized in Scripture as the mark of recognition of the divine presence."¹⁰

- B. Simon's Peter's Commission: Peter was still awe - struck—would Jesus indeed "depart" from him? The words that are addressed to the contrite fisherman calms his existing fear.¹¹ Henceforth, Peter, you will be a fisher - of - men. The tense is continuous—Jesus draws an analogy between Peter's occupation and his calling. It is interesting in this light to note how the symbol of the fish became the symbol of early Christians.¹²

CONCLUSION: Our experience must parallel Peter's. How self - confident we are! How self - sufficient! We must be brought to see who Jesus really is and see ourselves as we really are. Those who are full - fed and self - satiated have no sense of hunger, no sense of want. Those who see themselves as healthy have no desire to see the Great Physician. Those who see themselves as righteous have no need to seek a Savior—but to those who do, there is Jesus and His words "fear not."

ENDNOTES

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- ¹ The expression "Follow Me" (Matthew 4:20, 22) would be readily understood as implying a call to become the permanent disciple of a teacher. Cf. Alfred Edersheim, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*, I (Longmans, Green, and Co., 1899), p. 474.
- ² The details are discussed by Edersheim, *Ibid*, pp. 474 - 75.
- ³ Luke always calls this body of water a lake, whereas the other Gospels, following the O.T., call it a sea. In the O.T. it was referred to as the "Sea of Kinnereth" (Numbers 34:11; Joshua 12:3). Matthew, Mark, and John have the "Sea of Galilee." The Romans called it the lake of Tiberius. Cf. Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to St. Luke* (Eerdmans, 1977), p. 112.
- ⁴ The best time for fishing with nets was during the dark night, and the worst time was during the morning with the glistening rays of the sun on the waters. Cf. N. Geldenhuys, *The Gospel of Luke* (Eerdmans, 1979), p. 181.
- ⁵ Cf. A. B. Bruce, *The Expositor's Greek Testament: The Gospels*, I (Eerdmans, 1970), p. 495.
- ⁶ R. C. Sproul, *The Holiness of God* (Wheaton: Tyndale, 1985), p. 77.
- ⁷ Cf. A. T. Robertson, *Word Pictures In the New Testament*, II (Broadman, 1930), p. 71.
- ⁸ G. Campbell-Morgan, *The Gospel According to Luke* (Revell, 1939), p. 74. This is also highlighted by N. Geldenhuys, *op. cit.*, p. 182.
- ⁹ H. P. Liddon, *The Divinity of Our Lord* (rpt. Klock & Klock, 1978), p. 372.
- ¹⁰ B. B. Warfield, *The Lord of Glory* (rpt. Baker, 1974), p. 142.
- ¹¹ "Do not fear," PHOBOU, present tense imperative with the negative indicates a prohibition of an existing action, lit. "stop being fearful."
- ¹² Augustine gives the well-known Greek anagram ICHTHYS. "If you join the initial letters of these five Greek words—which mean 'Jesus Christ the Son of God, the Savior' they will make the word ICHTHYS, that is 'fish', in which word Christ is mystically understood, because He was able to live, that is, to exist, without sin in the abyss of this mortality as in the depths of water." *The City of God in The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, ed. P. Schaff, II (Eerdmans, 1973), p. 373.