



"I am sorry for the men who do not read the Bible every day. I wonder why they deprive themselves of the strength and the pleasure."

—Woodrow Wilson

16-Oct-20

Why 153 Fish? (Part One)

In [Psalm 12:6](#), David compares God's Word to silver that has been purified seven times. His revelation contains nothing superfluous, and thus each detail, no matter how seemingly insignificant, holds something of value for us.

One of Jesus Christ's post-resurrection appearances contains one such detail. Seven of the disciples go fishing, and Jesus performs a miracle allowing the previously unsuccessful fishermen to haul in a catch of large fish—153, to be precise—without the nets breaking ([John 21:11](#)).

Why did Jesus provide exactly 153 fish? It is a specific number. The disciples did not catch "a lot of fish" or "about 150 fish," but exactly "153 fish." Apparently, the number stuck in John's mind for decades, from the time of the miracle until he penned his gospel. This number must hold some significance, but what is it?

Unraveling this mystery requires understanding something about John's gospel. Written much later than Matthew's, Mark's, and Luke's gospels, [the gospel](#) of John not only details Jesus' life and works but also builds the ironclad case that Jesus is the Messiah. John's gospel highlights eight signs Christ performed, giving it a sturdy structure. These signs were not just demonstrations of divine power but also specific acts that pointed to Jesus as the Messiah, particularly Israel's Messiah. While He is the Savior of all mankind, these eight signs had great relevance for the floundering physical nation in dire need of the promised Seed.

As with other collections in God's Word, John arranged his eight signs in a structure called a chiasm: The first corresponds to the last, the second corresponds to the second to last, and so on. The first to notice this structure and correlation appears to be E. W. Bullinger, who wrote his thoughts on the eight signs in Appendix 176 of *The Companion Bible*.

The remarkable catch of 153 fish is the eighth sign in John's gospel, and it corresponds to—and in many ways answers—the first sign, Jesus' turning water into wine at the wedding in Cana.

John 1 portrays the overall environment in which Jesus manifested the eight signs and why the people of Judea and Galilee needed Him so much. [John 1:11](#) records that the Word came to His own—meaning, His own people—but they did not receive Him. The physical nation was spiritually blind, such that the people could not recognize their divine King when He stood before them. In verse 31, John the Baptist, speaking of Jesus, says, "I did not know Him; but that He should be revealed to Israel, therefore I came baptizing with water." Of course, John was aware of his cousin, but he did not grasp the magnitude of who He was until the events surrounding His [baptism](#). Thus, John proclaims that Jesus' baptism was to reveal Him to Israel. Somewhat later, in verse 49, [God](#) gives Nathanael the spiritual comprehension to recognize that he was in the presence of the Son of God, who was also the King of Israel.

Christ, then, came to His own people, and His baptism revealed Him. Though a few people recognized Him for who He was, most did not. This environment sets the stage for grasping many features of His ministry. Immediately after this, John introduces the first sign:

Now both Jesus and His disciples were invited to the wedding. And when they ran out of wine, the mother of Jesus said to Him, "They have no wine." Jesus said to her, "Woman, what does your concern have to do with Me? My hour has not yet come." His mother said to the servants, "Whatever He says to you, do it." Now there were set there six waterpots of stone, according to the manner of purification of the Jews, containing twenty or thirty gallons apiece. Jesus said to them, "Fill the waterpots with water." And they filled them up to the brim. And He said to them, "Draw some out now, and take it to the master of the feast." And they took it. ([John 2:2-7](#))

These events begin with a condition of lack—something was missing. As Mary says, "They have no wine." Such a lack would pose an embarrassing problem for a wedding feast, and Jesus exhibited mercy in intervening to allow the joyous occasion to continue. But we should not forget the highly symbolic nature of John's gospel, for the circumstance portrays a spiritual reality. Whether or not she knew it, Mary described not just the wedding feast but also the physical nation—its citizens had no *symbolic* wine, whose significance we will explore in Part Two. Instead of wine, the wedding party (and the nation) had only water.

John points out that this water was for purification "according to the manner of the Jews." The purification rituals sprang from the minds of men rather than from Scripture. During His ministry, Jesus regularly encountered Jewish tradition making the Word of God of no effect. Not every Jewish tradition undermined God's Word, and washing itself constitutes no threat.

However, the overall effect of both the Oral Law and all the rabbis' opinions was that Jews of that time pushed God's pure Word into the background. In part, their skewed priorities underlay the nation's inability to see their King in their midst. Their minds, having formed wrong habits of thinking, had become accustomed to focusing on the wrong things, following the wrong patterns of understanding, and arriving at the wrong conclusions in spiritual matters.

As John records, there were six waterpots, and biblically, six is the number of man. Carnal men added the purification rituals to the worship of God. God's law only specifies ceremonial washing for the priests when they served in the Tabernacle and later the Temple, not for the individual or on occasions other than Tabernacle/Temple service. In addition, the six waterpots made of stone may

symbolize the people's hearts since vessels often represent people. Because of their hearts of stone, the people could not change and so could not have a meaningful relationship with their Creator. They needed to replace their hearts of stone with hearts of flesh.

To summarize, the Jews had their own approach to ceremonial cleanliness. They had this tradition in abundance, as shown by the waterpots containing between 120 and 180 gallons of water for their purification rites. What they lacked, and what they needed for this occasion, was wine. We will explore the symbol of wine in Part Two and begin tying this first sign to its chiasmic partner, the enigmatic catch of 153 fish.

- David C. Grabbe

World News Highlights

<https://c.cgg.org/index.cfm/r/?s=QnqzWYE>

Oregon Live (The Oregonian) 12-Oct-20

<https://c.cgg.org/index.cfm/r/?s=IjnJcOM>

MarketWatch 12-Oct-20

<https://c.cgg.org/index.cfm/r/?s=DCzbmjc>

Buchanan.org 18-Sep-20

<https://c.cgg.org/index.cfm/r/?s=O2dfIFJ>

Interesting Engineering 11-Oct-20

<https://c.cgg.org/index.cfm/r/?s=IPPWNM4>

Axios 13-Oct-20

<https://c.cgg.org/index.cfm/r/?s=XXi3Oqr>

The Washington Free Beacon 15-Oct-20

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<https://c.cgg.org/index.cfm/r/?s=GTKgLY9>

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New Transcripts

[1174c: An Overview of the Immigration Problem](#)

Given by John W. Ritenbaugh on 31-Aug-13

[1176c: What's Happening to the Blacks?](#)

Given by John W. Ritenbaugh on 07-Sep-13

[1473: Letters to Seven Churches \(Part Four\): Pergamos](#)

Given by Richard T. Ritenbaugh on 09-Feb-19

[1499: Many Are Called, But Few Are Chosen \(Part Eleven\)](#)

Given by Martin G. Collins on 27-Jul-19

Prayer Requests

New prayer request updates have been posted for the following people:

[Joann Hucks](#)

[Levi Lewis](#)

[Kim Myers](#)

[Vicky Roemhild](#)

[Roger Ross](#)

[Musonda Sakala](#)

[Musonda Sakala](#)

From the Archives: Featured Sermon

[Post-Resurrection Lessons](#)

by Richard T. Ritenbaugh

Focusing upon the post-resurrection accounts of Christ's ministry, Richard Ritenbaugh sees parallels between the reactions of the disciples and our own during times of upheaval: (1) displaying a state of shock, fear, and disbelief (2) having been conditioned by their backgrounds to disbelieve, and (3) not yet converted. On the Road to Emmaus we see the agitation, turmoil, and confusion displayed by some of his followers, being unable to put the scriptures and the physical facts together. The account of Thomas shows the necessity of taking God at His word, realizing that faith is the evidence of things not seen. The account of Jesus conversation with Peter reveals the intensity of commitment and concern for the spiritual flock Jesus expects His followers to have. Like the disciples, we should have all the proof we need, allowing us to have the faith to nurture God's spiritual flock.

From the Archives: Featured Article

[Leadership and Covenants \(Part Eleven\): Signs](#)

by John W. Ritenbaugh

After Noah and his family left the ark, God set the rainbow in the sky as a sign of His covenant with

all living creatures not to flood the world again. Ever since, John Ritenbaugh explains, God has been providing additional signs, particularly those that promise that He will provide a Savior and Redeemer to free mankind from its bondage to sin and death.

Featured Audio Schedule

Friday Night Bible Study

The next Bible Study will be **Hebrews (Part 13)**, given by **John W. Ritenbaugh** on **Friday 16-Oct-20**. The Bible Study will be continuously available from **6:00 pm Friday** until **12:00 pm Saturday (EST)**.

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