



"Procrastination is the art of keeping up with yesterday."
—Don Marquis

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Why 153 Fish? (Part Two)

As Part One detailed, the apostle John structured his gospel around eight signs that reveal [Jesus Christ](#) as the Messiah. He arranged these signs so that the first sign corresponds to the eighth, the second sign to the seventh, etc. To understand the specific and mysterious 153 fish that the disciples catch in the eighth sign, we must learn the lessons of the first sign, when Jesus turned water into wine at a wedding feast in Cana. The wedding party—and the physical nation—had water for man-devised purification rites, but the wedding feast—and the nation—lacked the all-important wine.

In the New Testament, wine represents the covenantal relationship with [God](#). During the [Passover](#) on the eve of His crucifixion, Jesus said that the cup of wine represented the New Covenant in His blood ([Luke 22:20](#); [1 Corinthians 11:25](#)). It would cost Him His life. At the wedding, though, Christ told Mary that His "hour had not yet come" ([John 2:4](#))—the hour to seal the covenant with His blood. By miraculously supplying wine, He fulfilled the physical need for that occasion, pointing to the even greater spiritual need that He would fill when He instituted the New Covenant.

The people had their traditions, as seen in the six waterpots for ritual purification, but they needed the wine of the New Covenant. Unlike the Old

Covenant, the New Covenant includes forgiveness, a personal relationship with the Father and the Son, and the divine law written on their hearts (see [Hebrews 8:8-12](#)). The blood of the New Covenant, symbolized by the wine, flows into a person rather than merely being sprinkled on the outside, as had the blood that ratified the Old Covenant ([Exodus 24:8](#)).

In addition, wine adds a pleasurable quality to a meal or other social occasion. [Psalm 104:15](#) says that wine "makes glad the heart of man"—it causes the heart to rejoice. [Judges 9:13](#) agrees, saying that wine "cheers both God and men." In other words, wine positively affects the heart. We realize this when drinking the physical fruit of the vine, but the wine of the covenant similarly cheers and heartens us for spiritual reasons. The Jewish nation lacked this—they had no wine, as Mary said. They greatly needed the New Covenant.

Zechariah 10 contains a prophecy of the restoration of Israel and Judah that correlates to this miraculous sign. It likens the nations' restored relationship with God to the heart rejoicing as if with wine:

I will strengthen the house of Judah, and I will save the house of Joseph. I will bring them back, because I have mercy on them. They shall be as though I had not cast them aside; for I am the LORD their God, and I will hear them. Those of Ephraim shall be like a mighty man, and *their heart shall rejoice as if with wine*. Yes, their children shall see it and be glad; *their heart shall rejoice in the LORD*. ([Zechariah 10:6-7](#); emphasis ours)

Jesus' production of an abundance of wine, combined with wine's symbolic meaning, echoes the essence of this prophecy. Soon, God will regather Judah and Israel and offer them the blood of the New Covenant. He will free them from the respective enslaving traditions of Judaism and Babylonish Christianity, such as [Christmas](#), [Easter](#), [Sunday-worship](#), and other anti-God practices. Having a restored covenantal relationship with God, they will rejoice as that spiritual wine gladdens their hearts.

With these things in mind, we turn to John's eighth sign. The apostle conspicuously notes that Nathaniel was from Cana in Galilee, where Jesus performed the first sign:

After these things Jesus showed Himself again to the disciples at the Sea of Tiberias, and in this way He showed Himself: 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 are going with you also." They went out and immediately got into the boat, and that night they caught nothing. But when the morning had now come, Jesus stood on the shore; yet the disciples did not know that it was Jesus. Then Jesus said to them, "Children, have you any food?" They answered Him, "No." And He said to them, "Cast the net on the right side of the boat, and you will find some." So they cast, and now they were not able to draw it in because of the multitude of fish. Therefore that disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, "It is the Lord!" Now when Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he put on his outer garment (for he had removed it), and plunged into the sea. But the other disciples came in the little boat (for they were not far from land, but about two hundred cubits), dragging the net with fish. Then, as soon as they had come to land, they saw a fire of coals there, and fish laid on it, and bread. Jesus said to them, "Bring some of the fish which you have just caught." Simon Peter went up and dragged the net to land, full of large fish, one hundred and fifty-three; and although there were so many, the net was not broken. Jesus said to them, "Come and eat breakfast." Yet none of the disciples dared ask Him, "Who are You?"—knowing that it was the Lord. Jesus then came and took the bread and gave it to them, and likewise the fish. ([John 21: 1-13](#))

The disciples fish all night but catch nothing. They confess to not having any food. Jesus—whom they do not yet recognize—tells them to cast their nets on the right side of the boat, and when they do this, they catch so many large fish that they cannot draw the net onto the boat. John immediately recognizes Jesus, probably because he, Peter, and James had experienced a similar miracle near the beginning of Christ's ministry (see [Luke 5:1-11](#)). The disciples come to shore, dragging the net, and verse 11 informs us that the catch, totaling 153 large fish, had not broken the net.

In the first sign, the people had no wine, and in the eighth, the disciples had no food. Jesus had said earlier that His food was "to do the will of Him who sent Me, and to finish His work" ([John 4:34](#)), and here, the disciples went fishing for food instead of doing God's work. They had returned to their previous vocation to provide for themselves when, for three-and-a-half years, God had provided for all their needs while they did His work. Rather than seeking a way to continue, they had gone fishing, and consequently, they had no food.

Whereas Mary's statement, "They have no wine," aptly describes the state of the nation, Christ's query about whether His disciples had any food concerns their spiritual condition. His miracle, then, points to the work they were to do so they would have food. In the first sign, Christ commanded the servants to fill the waterpots, and in the eighth, He commanded His disciples to cast the net. He performed the miracles, but His servants also had work to do.

Also, in the first sign, Jesus produced wine, and in this one, He provided bread and fish ([John 21:9](#)). A careful reading of [John 21:9-13](#) shows that the 153 fish were not what fed the disciples, as Jesus had bread and fish on the coals even before the disciples came to shore. The fish they caught were for a different purpose, as we will see in Part Three.

- David C. Grabbe

From the Archives: Featured Sermon

[What Is the Work of God Now? \(Part One\)](#)

by John W. Ritenbaugh

The preaching the gospel to the world, held by some to be the only identifying mark of the church, is at best the beginning of a long, complex process of creating disciples and godly offspring through steady feeding and encouragement to overcome (feeding the flock). God, as a responsible parent, is not one-dimensional in assigning responsibilities to His children, but frequently shifts gears, changing circumstances, giving His begotten children a well-rounded education. God - not Satan or an incompetent

ministry - engineered the massive scattering of the church of God to move it away from pernicious and fatal Laodiceanism. We need to adjust to the new situation, realizing that God has engineered these events with the real work of God in mind: making man in His image and reproducing Himself.

From the Archives: Featured Article

[Is the Christian Required to Do Works? \(Part One\)](#)

by John W. Ritenbaugh

Why do so many nominal Christians reject works and obedience to God's law? John Ritenbaugh posits that they do this because they fail to gather God's whole counsel on this subject. In doing so, they miss vital principles that help to bring us into the image of God.

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