



"Do not pray for tasks equal to your powers; pray for powers equal to your tasks."

—Phillips Brooks

30-Oct-20

Why 153 Fish? (Part Three)

The eighth sign of Christ's Messiahship in John's gospel contains the curious feature of 153 fish, which [Jesus](#) miraculously provided. As a symbol, fish typically represent people, such as when Jesus initially called some of His disciples, promising to make them "fishers of men" ([Matthew 4:19](#); [Mark 1:17](#)). Similarly, in the Parable of the Dragnet, a net is cast, and all kinds of fish are drawn in. The good fish are stored, and the bad are thrown away ([Matthew 13:47-50](#)).

Why did Jesus provide precisely 153 fish? What about this unusual number impressed the apostle John enough to remember it decades later?

Few commentaries suggest any explanation for the number, and fewer still advance a theory of any substance. However, one relevant observation is that 153 is the product of nine and seventeen. In the Bible, the number *nine* signifies divine judgment, and *seventeen* indicates the perfection of spiritual order. In this way, the 153 fish represent God's judgment in bringing about His perfect spiritual order.

The Bible presents only one occurrence of 153 people, which exposes the spiritually derelict state of the nation, particularly in the person of Ahaziah, the king of Israel. Ahaziah was an evil king—a Baal-worshipper who provoked [God](#) to anger and reigned only for two years ([I Kings 22:51-53](#)). [II Kings 1:2-16](#) tells the story of King Ahaziah and his literal and metaphorical fall. Having fallen through a lattice, he had been injured badly enough to question whether he would recover. But instead of seeking the true God, Ahaziah sends messengers to inquire of Baal-Zebub, the god of the Philistine city of Ekron (verse 2). *Baal-Zebub* means "the lord of flies" or "the lord of death." Because of the king's idolatrous inquiry, God tells Elijah to intercept the messengers and relay God's message that, because Ahaziah had sought a false god, he would not recover (verses 3-4).

Ahaziah sends soldiers to capture Elijah, and it is in their number that we find 153 people. First, one group of fifty men and their captain go to get Elijah, and the prophet calls fire from heaven to consume them (verses 9-10). Then, a second group of fifty and its captain go and are likewise incinerated (verses 11-12). The captain of the third group of fifty, however, humbly asks for mercy for himself and his men, and before Elijah could ask for fire from heaven, God intervenes and tells His prophet to go with them to deliver His message to Ahaziah (verses 13-16). The three groups of fifty men plus the three captains add up to 153.

The 153 fish in the disciples' net do not represent Ahaziah's soldiers, but the circumstances in ancient Israel provide a reference point. As in the first sign, which symbolized the nation's lack of—and need for—symbolic wine, the eighth sign also corresponds with Israel and her debased spiritual state. Israel in Elijah's day was apostate, even as Israel in Christ's day rejected and killed their Creator and King.

The number 153, then, points to Israel in a spiritually destitute condition, at a time of gross idolatry when God's servants (symbolized by Elijah) suffer persecution, and the humble and God-fearing (the final group of soldiers) escape God's fiery judgment. Yet the eighth sign also points to a *miraculous* gathering of fish—of men. [Jeremiah 16:14-16](#) contains a prophecy that combines these elements of a people in a destitute condition being gathered:

"Therefore behold, the days are coming," says the LORD, "that it shall no more be said, 'The LORD lives who brought up the children of Israel from the land of Egypt,' but, 'The LORD lives who brought up the children of Israel from the land of the north and from all the lands where He had driven them.' For I will bring them back into their land which I gave to their fathers. "Behold, I will send for many fishermen," says the LORD, "and they shall fish them; and afterward I will send for many hunters, and they shall hunt them from every mountain and every hill, and out of the holes of the rocks."

God uses the imagery of fishermen gathering scattered Israelites to the Promised Land in a mighty act that will completely overshadow the original exodus. Verses 17-20 show that when the regathering occurs, Israel will still be idolatrous. A parallel prophecy in [Ezekiel 20:33-38](#) foretells that God will not allow all the regathered into the land, as He will purge the rebels. But even as Jesus caused the disciples to catch a precise number of fish, so He declares that Israel "will be gathered one by one" ([Isaiah 27:12](#)). He promises, though He will "sift the house of Israel among all nations, as grain is sifted in a sieve; yet not the smallest grain shall fall to the ground" ([Amos 9:9](#)). The precise number of fish signals that He knows where every Israelite is, and sometime soon, He will direct a vast but personal regathering of the rebellious nation.

The first sign teaches that when the Messiah gives [joy](#) to the nation through the restored covenantal relationship, He will fill it "up to the brim" ([John 2:7](#); see [Isaiah 9:2-7](#)), and when He fills the land with restored Israel, He will fill it to the last one ([Ezekiel 37:12-14](#)). In the eighth sign, Jesus signifies that He will be the gatherer ([Jeremiah 31:10](#)), while the seven disciples symbolize the spiritual perfection with which Israel will be gathered, one by one, to the last one.

After the eighth sign, Jesus charges Peter to feed His lambs, to tend His sheep, and to feed His sheep ([John 21:15-17](#)). His command has an obvious application in his role as the leading apostle, but his responsibility did not end when he died. In biblical numerology, the number eight signifies new beginnings, and Scripture often links it with resurrection. When Peter rises at Christ's return, he will judge the tribes of Israel, those [regathered Israelites](#)

who will need significant feeding and tending. It will be a job far larger in scope and duration than what he did as the apostle to the circumcision—to first-century Israel.

But just as Christ provides the wine that is lacking, the food that is necessary, and directs His servants in where to gather, so will He always supply what is needed. Even before the significant events of the end, He seeks those willing to fill the waterpots, to cast the nets, to drag the loads, to tend and feed, not just once, but day after day, if necessary. He looks for those who will serve—not with bravado and bombast, as Peter tended to do in his early years—but with genuine humility. Though such efforts themselves are not miraculous, God works through those who make the effort, even when it might seem futile. Even small things, done faithfully, have great effect where God is involved. And where there is [faith](#), God gives the increase.

- David C. Grabbe

From the Archives: Featured Sermon

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

by John W. Ritenbaugh

The popularly held notion that preaching the Gospel to the world as a witness is the sole identifying mark of God's church is shortsighted. There is a vast difference between "preaching the gospel to the world" and "making disciples"- the major focus in Matthew 28:20. The largest portion of the great commission demands that the lion's share of time, money, or energy ought to be invested in feeding the flock. With the present scattering of the church, engineered by Almighty God (not Satan) in response to our sick, rebellious, and unsound condition, our major obligation at this time should be to heal its wounds and to point it in the direction of repentance, overcoming, and growth. God indeed wants unity, but it has to be on His terms.

From the Archives: Featured Article

[Scattering and Gathering: Images of History and Prophecy \(Part One\)](#)

by Charles Whitaker

Scripture frequently employs pairs of opposites: good and evil, light and darkness, life and death. Another of these pairs is gathering and scattering, mutually exclusive actions that, though they cannot be done at the same time, can be accomplished at different times. Charles Whitaker contemplates the gathering God does to reverse the effects of calamity.

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