

## I. Introduction

Good morning! Welcome back from the summer holidays! Did you take some time off work and have some fun this past week? Did anyone visit the ocean, a lake, or a river? While you were there, did you do any fishing? Yes? No? Well did you eat any fish? Of course, lots of people like to eat fish!



By the way, if you ever visit Israel, be sure to go to Lake Galilee and eat some of the Saint Peter's fish. It is really quite delicious. And, the name reminds us that Peter was a fisherman. In fact, Peter, Andrew, James, and John were all fishermen, and it is possible that there were other fishermen among the disciples as well. Also, in a sense, all disciples of Jesus are called to be fishermen. Did you know that the Lord is calling you to be a fisherman? Hmm, some of you look a little unsure about that.



Do you remember what Jesus said when He began to call His disciples? **Matthew 4:18-20**, "As Jesus was walking beside the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon called Peter and his brother Andrew. They were casting a net into the lake, for they were fishermen. "Come, follow me," Jesus said, "and I will make you fishers of men." At once they left their nets and followed him." Starting with Peter and Andrew, all of us who follow Jesus are called to become fishers of men. I pray that we will all be diligent to answer that call, so that the Lord's church may be full of men and women praising His Holy Name.

In today's passage of Scripture we will see Peter diligently working as a fisher of men, setting the example for us. Let's take a look at Acts 9:32-43.

## II. Scripture Reading Acts 9:32-43, (NIV, 1984)

32 As Peter traveled about the country, he went to visit the saints in Lydda. 33 There he found a man named Aeneas, a paralytic who had been bedridden for eight years. 34 "Aeneas," Peter said to him, "Jesus Christ heals you. Get up and take care of your mat." Immediately Aeneas got up. 35 All those who lived in Lydda and Sharon saw him and turned to the Lord.

36 In Joppa there was a disciple named Tabitha (which, when translated, is Dorcas ), who was always doing good and helping the poor. 37 About that time she became sick and died, and her body was washed and placed in an upstairs room. 38 Lydda was near Joppa; so when the disciples heard that Peter was in Lydda, they sent two men to him and urged him, "Please come at once!" 39 Peter went with them, and when he arrived he was taken upstairs to the room. All the widows stood around him, crying and showing him the robes and other clothing that Dorcas had made while she was still with them.

40 Peter sent them all out of the room; then he got down on his knees and prayed. Turning toward the dead woman, he said, "Tabitha, get up." She opened her eyes, and seeing Peter she sat up. 41 He took her by the hand and helped her to her feet. Then he called the believers and the widows and presented her to them alive. 42 This became known all over Joppa, and many people believed in the Lord. 43 Peter stayed in Joppa for some time with a tanner named Simon.

## III. Teaching

When I was a boy growing up in Missouri, I used to watch a television show called, "The Sportsman's Friend," on Saturday mornings. The theme song for the show was, "Gone fishin' instead of just a-wishin'." It was fun to watch the show and pick up tips about how to be a better fisherman. But when the show



ended and the theme song played, I got the message. Watching is fun, but if you want any fish for dinner, you have to get up and go fishing.

That show was on TV for 48 years with the same host, a man named Harold Ensley who was truly good at fishing. Across America, kids and adults alike would watch Harold go fishing and he always brought back some nice fish. Millions of people watched Harold fish, but I wonder how many of them actually got up and went fishing? I don't know, but I would guess probably only one in a hundred. Sometimes Christians are like that too. Millions of Christians like to watch famous evangelists or hear stories about missionaries taking the gospel to the world. But how many Christians actually go fishing? We are called to be fishers of men and women and we need to go out and fish.

Peter understood this. If you had gone to Peter's house looking for him at the time of today's Bible passage, I think his wife would have probably said to come back later because that Peter was out fishing. Look at **Acts 9:32, "As Peter traveled about the country, he went to visit the saints in Lydda."** Peter was out and about, travelling from town to town and place to place in the countryside of Israel and Samaria. He was visiting the Christians and sharing the Good News with those who had not yet heard about Jesus' resurrection and the gospel of grace. And in his travels, he came to a place called Lydda.



**Acts 9:33-34, "There he found a man named Aeneas, a paralytic who had been bedridden for eight years. 'Aeneas,' Peter said to him, 'Jesus Christ heals you. Get up and take care of your mat.' Immediately Aeneas got up."** We are not told whether or not Aeneas was already a believer in Jesus, but I am sure that after this Aeneas must have been a devoted follower of Jesus. Notice what Peter does. Peter comes to the city and he finds a man in need. Peter speaks to the man in faith, giving glory to Jesus. Peter does not heal the man; Peter is very clear, he says, **"Jesus Christ heals you."**

When we go out to share the Good News of Jesus, we can imitate Peter's good example. Perhaps it will not be God's plan to do great miracles of healing through us, although that also is possible; the Lord is the same yesterday, today, and forever. However, regardless of whether God works obvious miracles through us or not, we can still do as Peter did. We can go out and look for those in need and minister to them in the Name of Jesus, showing God's love and giving God the glory. We can feed the hungry and give water to the thirsty. We can be a friend to those who are lonely and an encouragement to those who are discouraged. And in all that we do, we can give glory to Jesus by boldly speaking His Name as we serve others.

Not far from Lydda, there was also a town called Joppa, on the coast of the Mediterranean Sea. In this town there was a woman who was engaged in doing good works in the Name of Jesus, just as we have been discussing. **Acts 9:36-37, "In Joppa there was a disciple named Tabitha (which, when translated, is Dorcas ), who was always doing good and helping the poor. About that time she became sick and died, and her body was washed and placed in an upstairs room."** The believers in Joppa heard that Peter was in Lydda, a short distance away, so they sent two men to go and get him.

From Joppa to Lydda is about ten miles, so by the time the men went to Peter and returned with him, it was a journey of over twenty miles. So, it would have taken several hours or more before Peter arrived in Joppa. During this time, the widows in Joppa were weeping over the death of this beloved woman who had cared for them and helped them by making clothing for them. Finally Peter arrived. **Acts 9:40, "Peter sent them all out of the room; then he got down on his knees and prayed. Turning toward the dead woman, he said, "Tabitha, get up." She opened her eyes, and seeing Peter she sat up."**

I don't know for sure, but I imagine that Peter had no idea what was going to happen until after he knelt down and prayed. Two men had come to him in Lydda and told him that a dear sister in the faith has died and they asked him to come. Peter went, but there is no indication that Peter knew ahead of time that God would raise Tabitha from the dead. As brothers and sisters in the family of God, we also are often called to come to the side of others in our family who are sad or hurting because of loss or trouble. We usually don't know how God will use us in the situation, but if we go and pray and seek the Lord, then He will show us what to do.

Peter asked the others to leave the room. I think this was so that he could have a quiet time to pray and listen for the voice of the Lord. We are not told what Peter prayed or how the Lord spoke to Peter in that time of prayer, but the result is clear. When it was time for Peter to rise from his prayers, it was time for Tabitha to rise as well. **Acts 9:41, “He took her by the hand and helped her to her feet. Then he called the believers and the widows and presented her to them alive.”** After God raised Tabitha from the dead, Peter called together all of those who had mourned for her and presented her to them alive and well. The same people who had confirmed that she was dead became witnesses of the new life God had given her.



Peter went fishing and the Lord filled his nets. First in Lydda, and then in Joppa also, there was a great catch and many people believed in Jesus and joined the family of God. **Acts 9:35, “All those who lived in Lydda and Sharon saw him and turned to the Lord.” Acts 9:42, “This became known all over Joppa, and many people believed in the Lord.”** The church continued to grow rapidly and the gospel which was first proclaimed in Jerusalem continued to spread further and further.

Adam Clarke’s Bible Commentary estimates that from the time of Jesus’ resurrection to the end of Acts 9, about eight years had passed. During this time the church grew dramatically, both in times of persecution and in times of peace. But the growth of the church up to this point was small compared to what was to come in Acts 10 and beyond, because in Acts 10 the gospel begins to be proclaimed with power among the gentiles.

In **Acts 9:43** we can see a hint of what is coming. **“Peter stayed in Joppa for some time with a tanner named Simon.”** Many of us probably read this verse without thinking much about it. But, actually, the home of a tanner is a very unlikely place for Peter to be staying. Bible scholars disagree concerning whether the occupation of a tanner was necessarily unclean under Jewish law. But regardless of the law, we know that the Jewish religious leaders despised tanners because of their daily contact with dead animals.



Peter chose to lodge in the home of Simon the tanner despite this. And so we see that there is a hint that Peter was already losing the common prejudices of the Jewish people of his day. And in Acts 10 we will see how the Lord tears down the remaining prejudices in Peter’s heart as the door is thrown open for the Good News of Jesus to go to all of the nations of the world.

From the beginning, God made it clear that His heart is for the salvation of the nations. Consider the words God spoke to Abraham all the way back in **Genesis 12:3, “I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.”** As God proclaims in these prophetic words, the Savior who was to come from among Abraham’s descendants is a Savior for all peoples on earth. Jesus is Lord and God, Savior for all nations. Jesus freely gives the gifts of forgiveness of sins and eternal life to all who trust in Him. But the Jewish people of the time were not looking for a Savior for the whole world; they were looking for a Savior for Israel, a Messiah for the Jews.



It takes a long time for people to change their hearts about such things, so Jesus reminded the disciples that He was a Savior for all peoples on many occasions. Sometimes Jesus was very direct. Sometimes He was more subtle. In Mark 11, we can read about one of the times that Jesus reminded people of God’s love for all nations. **Mark 11:15-17, “On reaching Jerusalem, Jesus entered the temple area and began driving out those who were buying and selling there. He overturned the tables of the money changers and the benches of those selling doves, and would not allow anyone to carry merchandise through the temple courts. And as he taught them, he said, “Is it not written: ‘My house will be called a house of prayer for all nations’? But you have made it `a den of robbers.’”** That’s pretty direct. People of all nations were supposed to be able to pray in the courtyard of the temple in Jerusalem. Just for fun, I also want to take a look at a more subtle message that Jesus gave Peter and the disciples on one occasion. But first, we are going to take a short detour.

There is a second century Greek poem called *Halieutica*<sup>1</sup> which is attributed to a poet named Oppian. The poem is about fishing, fishermen, and fish. In particular, the poem has a lot to say about fish. Here are a few lines of the poem, just to give you the idea:

*“Others roam in the unmeasured seas far from the dry land and companion not with the shores; to wit, the dashing Tunny, most excellent among fishes for spring and speed, and the Sword-fish, truly named, and the huge race of the Orcynus and the Premas and the Cybeia and the Coly-mackerel and the Scytala and the tribes of the Hippurus. Among these, too, is the Beauty-fish, truly named, a holy fish; and among them dwells the Pilot-fish which sailors revere exceedingly, and they have given him this name for his convoying of ships.”*

The poem is a fascinating literary work and it also provides an extensive classification system for the fishes of the sea. By now you are wondering what this has to do with the Bible. Well, in the fourth century AD, the famous theologian Jerome cited this poem in his interpretation of John 21.

In John 21, after Jesus has risen from the dead and appeared to the disciples in Jerusalem, Peter and the other disciples go back to Lake Galilee, and Peter decides that they should go fishing. While they are fishing, Jesus appears on the shore and tells them to throw the net on the right side of the boat. Then the net is filled and they realize it is Jesus. Peter is in such a hurry to see Jesus that he jumps out of the boat and swims ashore. The disciples then have a breakfast of bread and fish with Jesus. But first we find this verse, **John 21:11, “Simon Peter climbed aboard and dragged the net ashore. It was full of large fish, 153, but even with so many the net was not torn.”**



A precise number is given for how many fish were caught and Bible scholars agree that the number 153 is symbolic. But there are many opinions about how to interpret the number. However, I find the interpretation of Jerome most interesting. In his explanation, Jerome cited the poem, *Halieutica* as evidence that the ancient Greeks classified the fish of the world into 153 kinds. If this is so, then it is likely that Peter and the others who fished for a living would have known about this. Therefore, the 153 fish they caught would symbolically represent all the kinds of fish in the world. Jerome thus interprets the catch of 153 fish to be yet another example of how the Lord was teaching His disciples that the blessings of the gospel were to be shared with all nations.

It is impossible for us to know for sure whether this was the original meaning. However, it reminds us again of how the Lord communicated His heart for the nations in many ways. In Acts 10, the Lord will break down Peter’s remaining resistance and Peter will see clearly how God loves the nations.

#### IV. Conclusion

Today, we have mostly talked about the need for Christians to be fishers of men so that Gospel may be preached in every place so that many may come to know Jesus. But before we can be fishermen, we must first be fish, that is, we must make sure that we have been well and truly caught by the love of Jesus. Before we can walk with the Lord, we must receive healing like Aeneas. Before we can live the new life as born again Christians, we must be raised from the dead like Tabitha. Without Jesus, we are dead in our sins. But God has provided a wonderful solution to the problems of sin and death. To all who call on the Name of Jesus and trust in Him, God gives grace and mercy for salvation unto new life. Let’s close with **Ephesians 2:4-5, “But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions —it is by grace you have been saved.”** Amen! Let’s pray.

#### V. Prayer

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<sup>1</sup> <http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Oppian/Halieutica/>