

The Night Of Fruitless Toil

John 21:1-14

Pastor John Miller

This is one of my favorite night scenes, and it goes into the morning of the next day.

In John 21:1-14 it says, “After these things Jesus showed Himself again to the disciples at the Sea of Tiberias...”—which is another name for the Sea of Galilee—“...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...”—which could be Andrew and Philip—“...were together.” So there were seven disciples.

Verse 3, “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?’” Or Jesus was asking, “Have you caught any fish?”

“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...”—which is John, the writer of this Gospel—“...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. This is now the third time Jesus showed Himself to His disciples after He was raised from the dead.”

The Christian life begins with salvation. That's God's work for me. “God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son...”—that is, “Jesus,” who died on the Cross—“...that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.” So the Christian life starts with the new birth or being born again or regenerated by the Holy Spirit.

Then that begins a process we call “sanctification,” which is God's work in me. God's work for me is salvation, and God's work in me—a life-long process—is sanctification. Sanctification is God making me into the image of His Son, Jesus Christ.

Then the third work that God does is God's work through me, which we call service. God works

in me and through me to be a blessing to everyone around me.

So there is salvation, beginning the Christian life; there is sanctification, the process through the Christian life, making us more like Christ; and then the service, where God works in me and through me, to be a blessing to everyone around me.

Every Christian should desire to be used by God. In studying for this message, I thought of an old hymn that had the chorus:

"To be used of God, to sing, to speak, to pray;

To be used of God to show someone the way.

I long so much to feel the touch

Of His consuming fire;

To be used by God is my desire."

So every Christian who has been saved and is being sanctified, has a natural progression to want to be used by God. "God, you saved me; You're changing me by Your Spirit; so Lord, I want to be used by You for Your glory." You should have a desire to be used.

When any young men ask me about pastoral ministry, they often ask, "Pastor Miller, how did you get started in becoming a pastor?" I always go back to say that basically God put within my heart a desire to be used. I never had any aspirations to pastor a church or to be a Bible teacher. I just knew that I was saved, I was thankful to Jesus and I just wanted to be used by Him. So any door that opened to me, I walked right through it. I rolled up my sleeves and just got busy serving the Lord.

They say that a parked car is not easily steered, but when it's moving, it's easy to direct it. A lot of times Christians just sit around waiting for some great evangelist—maybe Billy Graham—to call and say, "Can you fill in for me this weekend?" It'll never happen. Instead, we should say, "Okay, I'll teach the Sunday school class, or I'll usher or I'll clean the church. I just want to be a servant; I want to be used by You." It's so important to have that desire. I see it as a God-given desire. If it hasn't started in your heart, then get on your knees and ask God to give you a desire to be used by Him. "I want to be Your instrument. I want to bring glory to You." So I think God starts by putting that desire in your heart, and then we obey Him in the direction God is leading us.

We will learn some lessons in this passage on Christian service. I want to point out three things about fruitful Christian service. First, we learn that God uses ordinary people to do extraordinary, spiritual work. Verses 1 says, "After these things..." What things? After Jesus had risen from the dead, proved Himself alive, after the purpose statement in John 20:30-31, where He said these signs were done so "that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son

of God, and that believing you may have life in His name.”

Verses 1-2, “After these things Jesus showed Himself again to the disciples at the Sea of Tiberias...”—this is one of the post-Resurrection appearances of Jesus—“...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.”

So the Gospel of John opens with a prologue in John 1:1-18, where there is focus on the pre-incarnate Christ and His activity. Then it closes with the epilogue, John 21, of the post-Resurrection appearances of Jesus and focuses on His ministry. And the same characters who are found in chapter 1 are also found in chapter 21, verse 2.

Some people say that John 21 is just kind of tacked on to this Gospel. Some even say it is written by someone else, that it's not written by John. However, there is no basis for that from the manuscripts, so there is no reason to believe that.

So the Gospel of John has a prologue and an epilogue, showing that Christ is risen, He did this miracle that we will read about, He proved Himself alive and He was with the disciples and taught them lessons on service.

Now notice who Jesus is going to be using, in verse 2: “Simon Peter, Thomas called the Twin, Nathanael of Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two others of His disciples.” So the lesson for us here is that God uses ordinary people. Simon Peter was called “the denier.” When Peter was by the fire in Caiaphas’ courtyard and the servant girl said to him, “You also were with Jesus of Galilee,” he said, “I do not know what you are saying.” Then he began to curse and swear, saying, “I do not know the Man!”

So if God can use Peter, God can use us. When Jesus rose from the dead, He said, “Tell My disciples—and Peter.” I’m not saying that it’s okay to deny the Lord. It means that in spite of our failures, in spite of our weaknesses and our shortcomings, God can forgive us and restore us. In our text, Jesus restores Peter back to service. Jesus asked Peter, “Do you love Me?” When Peter said he did, then Jesus told him, “Feed My lambs.” If we love the Lord, we will feed God’s sheep.

Impetuous Peter I call the one with “foot-in-mouth disease.” Every time Peter speaks, he’s saying something off. He first says, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God” in his marvelous confession. Then when Jesus told him that He had to go to Jerusalem where He would be crucified and die, Peter said, “Far be it from You, Lord; this shall not happen to You!” Jesus had to rebuke Peter and said, “Get behind Me, Satan! You are an offense to Me, for you are not mindful of the things of God, but the things of men.” So in one breath, Peter says this anointed statement of who Christ is, and in the next breath, he says something that Jesus rebukes him for saying. I see Peter stumbling, bumbling and falling, yet God even used Peter.

Now notice the reference to “Thomas, called the Twin” or “called Didymus” in the King James translation. Peter is the denier and Thomas is “the doubter.” Evidently Thomas had a twin

brother, but we don't know who he was. Thomas was always saying things that were negative and doubting. When Jesus rose from the dead, His disciples told Thomas, "We have seen the Lord." So Thomas said, "Unless I see in His hands the print of the nails, and put my finger into the print of the nails, and put my hand into His side, I will not believe." Thomas was from Missouri, the show-me state. Then eight days later, Jesus appeared in the room to Thomas, and said, "Do not be unbelieving, but believing." When Thomas saw Jesus' scars, he said, "My Lord and my God!" Thomas doubted, yet God used Thomas.

When Jesus said He was going back to heaven, in John 14:4-6, He said, "And where I go you know, and the way you know. Thomas said to Him, 'Lord, we do not know where You are going, and how can we know the way?'" No one else had the guts to respond to Jesus except Thomas. Then Jesus said, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me."

Another episode was when Lazarus died, and word was sent to Jesus that his friend, Lazarus, was sick. Jesus said, "'Let us go to Judea again.' The disciples said to Him, 'Rabbi, lately the Jews sought to stone You, and are you going there again?'" So they are giving the Lord counsel. "Jesus answered, 'Are there not twelve hours in the day? If anyone walks in the day, he does not stumble, because he sees the light of this world. But if one walks in the night, he stumbles, because the light is not in him.'" And when Thomas realized that Jesus was going to go, he "said to his fellow disciples, 'Let us also go, that we may die with Him.'" Thomas was always looking on the negative side. Yet God used Thomas.

And my favorite is the "Sons of Thunder" or the sons of Zebedee, James and John, the author of this Gospel. They were called the Sons of Thunder because when the Samaritans didn't want Jesus to go through their territory, they got upset with the Samaritans. They said, "Lord, do you want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them?" Jesus had to rebuke them and said, "You do not know what manner of spirit you are of. For the Son of Man did not come to destroy men's lives but to save them."

I can imagine that sometimes Jesus must have shaken His head and said, "Where did I find these guys? Oh my. What was I thinking?!" You have the denier, the doubter and the Sons of Thunder. Yet God used them.

God used people just like you and me—ordinary, sinful, failing people for His glory. 1 Corinthians 1:26-29 says, "Not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called. But God has chosen the foolish things..."—there we are in the Bible—"...the weak things...the base things...the things which are despised...that no flesh should glory in His presence."

God used Moses, who said he couldn't speak well, wasn't very eloquent, so he asked God to send his brother, Aaron to Pharaoh. God also used Gideon, who was hiding when he was threshing the wheat. An angel came to him and called him "mighty man of valor." Gideon thought, Who me? God used Gideon to overcome the Midianites.

And then God used David. How marvelous that is! He was a little shepherd boy with a little sling. He was an ordinary person. When Saul told David he couldn't go out against Goliath and tried to get David to wear his armor, David said, "I cannot walk with these." So David took Saul's armor off. God used David even in his weakness. If God used David, he can use us.

That should encourage you, but if not, remember that God used Balaam's donkey. If God can use a donkey, he can use you and me. God wants to use you to minister to others.

If you haven't read the book *On Being a Servant* by Warren Wiersbe, I recommend it. He said, "Ministry takes place when divine resources meet human needs through loving channels to the glory of God." I like that explanation of ministry. God wants to work through us to be a loving channel of His divine resources to meet other's human needs. God's purpose in our service is for His glory.

How is God glorified in our service? There are three ways. When you can't explain it, the glory goes to God. Someone said, "When you can explain it, God didn't do it." There is a lot of truth behind that. When God does a work, He does it in a way we can't explain it, so it has to be the Lord. So when you can't explain it, evidently God's the one working.

Secondly, when people see Jesus and not us. When we're serving the Lord, we want the glory, the honor and the attention to be on Jesus Christ and not on us. In verse 7 of our text, when Peter and John realized that it was Jesus on the beach giving them direction for their service, John said, "It's the Lord!" When we're serving the Lord, we want the response of people to be "It's the Lord!" We don't want the focus to be on us, the servant. In Matthew 5:16, Jesus said, "Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven." Not you, but they'll glorify your Father, who is in heaven. So all we do for the Lord is for His glory.

Thirdly, God gets the glory when your service produces spiritual fruit. In John 15:8, Jesus said, "By this My Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit." When we're abiding in Christ, we're drawing our strength from Him, we're doing it in the energy and power of the Holy Spirit, then it's for His glory, and His Father is glorified in heaven.

There is a difference between results and fruit. Anybody in the energy of the flesh can produce results, but fruit is a work of the Spirit; it's God at work in our lives. It glorifies not man but God. And this fruit is something that lasts for eternity. Results glorify man and don't last; fruit glorifies God and lasts for eternity. So you should be thinking in terms of your life being fruitful for God, fruit that glorifies God and will last for all eternity.

The main point is that God wants to use you. And we should want to be used by God. If we have been saved and forgiven of our sins, how can we not say, "Here am I, Lord. Use me"?

The second lesson we learn is in verse 3. Jesus said, "Without Me you can do nothing." So God uses ordinary people, and without Jesus we can do nothing. "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.”

I can picture the scene. It's probably a warm day. The Sea of Galilee is a smooth, glassy body of water. The sun is probably glistening off the water of the lake. The hills are probably green with wild flowers on them. The air is fresh and you can hear the waves lapping on the beach. And Jesus had instructed them to go to Galilee and to wait for Him. They're waiting for Him, but Peter is thinking, It's a beautiful day, and the fish are probably jumping out there. “Let's go fishing.” So the others went with him.

If you're a fisherman, this is your favorite verse in the Bible. So if you're going fishing, you can tell your wife, “It's Biblical. It's right there in the Bible.”

I'm not a fisherman, so I don't understand spending a whole night on a boat to try to catch a bunch of smelly fish. Guys from our church used to charter a boat for the night and come back all messed up in the morning. And they didn't catch anything, just like the disciples. And they paid to do it and suffered during the experience! I don't understand that.

So Simon Peter said, “I am going fishing.” And some Bible scholars criticize Peter and the other disciples for this; they were supposed to wait for Jesus. But the Bible doesn't criticize them for not waiting. It's possible to wait for Jesus on a boat while dropping a line or throwing a net into the sea. They were out there fishing while waiting for the Lord.

Then I like the statement in verse 3: “That night they caught nothing.” That's fishing for ya'. Spent all that money, got sick on a boat, spent the night out!

“What did you catch?”

“Nothing.”

Why did I call it The Night of Fruitless Toil? There is a spiritual lesson behind it. It wasn't because of a lack of effort; they were professional fishermen. It wasn't because of a lack of ability or knowledge. I believe it was God's divine providence. God providentially, purposefully, intentionally steered every fish in the Galilean lake away from their boat. If their boat was on the east side, the fish went to the west side. If their boat went to the north end of the lake, all the fish went to the south end of the lake. God was controlling the fish that night. He purposely designed for them to spend the night toiling fruitlessly.

There is a great parallel in the opening of Jesus' ministry with the disciples in Luke 5. When He first called them, He was preaching from their boat. Again, they had spent the night fishing and had caught nothing. The same scenario. And Jesus had told them, “Launch out into the deep and let down your nets for a catch.” Being a professional fisherman, Peter said to Jesus, “Master, we have toiled all night and caught nothing; nevertheless at Your word I will let down the net.” The same thing happened as in our text; they threw out the net and caught a great number of fish. Peter fell down at Jesus' knees and said, “Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord!” Jesus made this statement to Peter: “From now on you will catch men.”

In the story in the Gospels, fishing became a picture of evangelism. Jesus told Peter that he would no longer fish for fish but would fish for men. Then went back to fishing for fish, and Jesus wanted to drive home a lesson by reminding them He had told them they would fish for men.

F. B. Meyer said about this night of fruitless toil, "It is His love, which is arranging all. In order to teach us some of the sweetest, deepest lessons that ever entered into the heart, there is not a cross, a loss or a disappointment or cause of failure in your life, which is not arranged and controlled by the loving Savior and intended to teach some lesson without which we would never have learned or acquired."

God purposely, intentionally allowed His disciples to fail, so they would see their inadequacies, their inabilities in the energy of the flesh, so they would need to depend on Christ to direct them, empower them and to guide them in their service for the Lord. God often uses our failures as the back door to success.

It's a very dangerous thing to succeed, in ministry or in life, without God. We want to be blessed, we want to be fruitful, but we should be humbly and reliably dependent upon God.

The Lord was just using this night of fruitless toil to give them the lesson that He needs to direct them, guide them and to be with them, and they need to trust Him in their service and in their ministry. Jesus said in John 15:5, "Without Me you can do nothing." He didn't say, "Without Me you can't do much" or "Without Me you can just do a little bit." No. He said, "Without Me you can do nothing." And we need to remember that.

There is a third lesson we learn from this night of fruitless toil. Let Jesus direct and empower our service, verses 4-6. "But when the morning had come..."—they had spent all night fishing, toiling and caught nothing—"...Jesus stood on the shore; yet the disciples did not know that it was Jesus." This is significant; they didn't know it was Jesus talking to them from the shore. Maybe He was backlit by the rising sun that morning, and they could only see Him silhouetted, so they didn't know it was Him.

Verse 5, "Then Jesus said to them, 'Children, have you any food?' They answered Him, 'No.'" That is the shortest answer the disciples ever gave to any question Jesus ever asked them. When a guy's been fishing all night and hasn't caught anything, the last thing he wants his wife to ask is, "What did you catch?"

"Nothing; let's change the subject."

So the disciples just answered Him, "No."

Now the change takes place in verse 6. "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." That's a miracle, performed by the risen Christ. The net was full, because they did what Jesus told them to do; they put the net on the other side.

I want you to know that Jesus did three things, verse 5. First, He asked a question: “Have you any food?” Whenever Jesus asks a question, He doesn’t ask it because He needs to know the answer; He asks it because He wants us to know the answer.

Second, He gave a command: “Cast the net on the right side of the boat.” This boat was probably 15-20 feet long and 4-5 feet wide; a little boat. So what’s the big deal—one side of the boat or the other side? If there’s no fish on this side, why would there be fish on the other side? It’s just a little, wooden boat. But when God directs our service, we must do what He tells us to do. Then the net will be full. So God is working to direct them by giving that command.

Thirdly, He sent His blessing: “So they cast...”—out of obedience to Jesus—“...and now they were not able to draw it in because of the multitude of fish.” Obediently, they followed the Lord’s command and the blessing followed. So we want the Lord to direct our service, guide our service, empower our service and then the blessing comes.

So Jesus asked a question, He gave a command and He sent the blessing, this miracle performed by the Lord.

Jesus said, “Follow Me, and I will make you fishers of men.” We obediently follow the Lord—where He wants us to go, what He wants us to say, what He wants us to do—so that He will send His blessing.

Now the story ends in verses 7-14, with the great discovery. The disciples went fishing, at night, in self-effort, working in the flesh, caught nothing and they came to the end of themselves.

Many times people say, “Lord, I want to serve You.” They might say, “I’m going to teach Sunday school.” Maybe the kids tie them up and throw them in the closet the first time they teach, so they want to give up. I can’t tell you how many times before I preach I’ll say, “I don’t know why I preach.” The devil tells you that you shouldn’t preach. He whispers in your ear, “Give it up. Throw in the towel. Quit.” But you have to just keep going; put one foot in front of the other. When you know what God has called you to do, and you keep doing what God has called you to do, it’s always too soon to quit. So just keep “truckin’” for the Lord, as we used to say. Satan comes to try to discourage you.

What the disciples discovered is marvelous. First, they discovered His presence, verse 7. They didn’t even know it was Jesus, but they cast their net on the other side, and they saw that the net was full of fish. “Therefore that disciple whom Jesus loved...”—John was referring to himself —“...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.”

So the disciples experienced His presence. Notice that John, in his sensitivity to Christ and his love for Christ, was the first to recognize, “It is the Lord!” I have hung onto that statement.

In the early days of the Calvary Chapel movement, Time-Life came to do an article on Chuck

Smith and wanted to know what the secret of the Calvary Chapel movement was. What was the secret of the success of this Jesus-people movement and all the churches that were planted? What was going on? Was it the hippie worship leader? Should a church get a hippie worship leader to cause it to grow? Was it the dove on the back wall? What do they need to do?

Chuck's answer was taken from this verse: "It is the Lord!" I like that. It's not me. It's not what we do. "It's the Lord!" It's God's work for God's glory. Whenever God uses you, that should always be your response: "It is the Lord!"

So they experienced His presence, and then, secondly, they experienced His provision, verse 9. "Then, as soon as they had come to land, they saw a fire of coals there, and fish laid on it, and bread." It was provided by the Lord. Verse 10, "Jesus said to them, 'Bring some of the fish which you have just caught.'" So it was God's provision, verse 9, and their participation, verse 10.

When we're doing what God has called us to do, how God has called us to do it, in the power of the Holy Spirit and not in self-effort and we see God working for His glory, we have His presence and His provision. He provided the fire, the fish and the bread, as they fellowshiped with Him.

At this time, in this culture, whenever you ate with someone, it meant you are participating, becoming one with them. So when we serve the Lord, we want to stay in fellowship and communion with Him. John 15:5 says, "He who abides in Me, and I in Him, bears much fruit." By obedience and prayer, we abide in Christ.

Thirdly, they had His participation, verse 12. "Jesus said to them, 'Come and eat breakfast.'" That literally meant, "Come and break fast." The Jews only ate two meals a day—one in the morning and one in the evening. I don't know how they survived. After the evening meal, they wouldn't eat again until the morning meal. That's what we get our word "breakfast" from. It means to break the fast. So Jesus was inviting them to come to break the fast, to come dine with Him, to commune with Him, to have joint participation together, to be in fellowship together.

And as they were sitting around the fire, that beautiful morning at the lake of Galilee, "Yet none of the disciples dared ask Him, 'Who are You?'—knowing that it was the Lord." Can you imagine them asking Jesus, "Who are You?" No, because they knew Jesus had come and performed a miracle. He had done what they could not do. It was a night of fruitless toil, but now their net is full, because Jesus shows up and directs our service and provides what we are searching for.

If you don't do these things by trusting in Him, participating with Him and relying on His provision, then you will lose your joy, lose your peace, lose the sense of His presence and lose your power. And when we speak of God's provision, God guides and God provides. God's

provision comes with God's plan. He will provide.

So the disciples have the fish, the bread, they're in fellowship and communing with Him and no one dared ask Him who He was. They knew it was the Lord.

In verse 13, "Jesus then came and took the bread and gave it to them, and likewise the fish." Then, in verse 14, John wraps it up with a summary statement: "This is now the third time Jesus showed Himself to His disciples after He was raised from the dead."

What do we learn from this episode on the Sea of Galilee? First, God uses ordinary people. Second, without Jesus "we can do nothing." Third, let Jesus direct and empower your service; divine resources meeting human needs, through loving channels, to the glory of God.

If God has saved you by His grace, if God is working in your heart to make you more like Christ, the natural outgrowth and flow of that is service.

I don't understand being a Christian and not saying, "Here am I, Lord. Use me. I'll go where You want me to go. I'll do what You want me to do. I'll say what You want me to say. I'll be what You want me to be."

The Bible says that you're not your own if you're a Christian. "You were bought at a price; therefore glorify God in your body and in your spirit, which are God's." Romans 12:1-2 says, "I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service...that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God."

I encourage you this week to pray, "God, give me a desire to be used by You. Use me for Your glory. Make me a blessing. I surrender to You. I yield to You. And I will be and do whatever and go wherever You want me to. I am Yours." Is your all on the altar? Have you sacrificed your whole life? Have you said, "Lord, take me and use me"? That's the Christian life. Anything less falls short of what God wants to do in and through you.