



# The Savior's *Compassion*

*The Savior's miracle of the fishes testifies of the great power He commanded over nature. It may also have been a great act of compassion.*

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**T**he account of a stunning miracle opens at Capernaum on the northern shore of the Sea of Galilee and ends with the call of two pairs of brothers to discipleship—Peter and Andrew, James and John (Luke 5:1–11). As with all of Jesus's miracles, they touch those around Him in healing, lifting ways, and unveil Him as the gracious, compassionate Lord and Master of all. And this event in the Savior's life is no exception.

We read that a crowd is pressing Jesus “to hear the word of God” (Luke 5:1). Of course, news of His abilities has spread throughout the neighborhood (Luke 4:23, 40–41). Because of the press of people, Jesus looks to put some distance between Himself and the gathered listeners—most likely so that they can all hear. So Jesus effectively commandeers Peter's boat by climbing into it and asking that Peter push off a few yards from the bank so that He can address the whole multitude that has congregated on the shore. Peter, who hosted Jesus in his home on the prior Sabbath and saw His powers as He healed His mother-in-law (4:38–39), readily agrees to the request





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***The newest Apostles likely rowed their fish-laden boats to nearby Taricheae, a fish-salting center. With their huge catch of fish preserved with salt, the fishermen could follow Christ, confident that their families would have enough fish to eat and sell.***

and pushes his boat into the water.

By the end of the sermon, Peter has now both heard Jesus's impressive words and witnessed His powers. As the crowd drifts away, Jesus elevates His request. In the first of Jesus's words recorded in this chapter, we read His instruction to Peter: "Launch out into the deep, and let down your nets for a draught" (verse 4). Peter's response to Jesus's directive betrays surprise: "we have toiled all the night and have taken nothing." In a word, the fishing has been awful. But Peter seems to have learned that this man from Nazareth is one to be obeyed. So he continues, "nevertheless at thy word I will let down the net" (verse 5).

Now comes the astonishing moment for Peter and Andrew—a series of plurals appear in the account, indicating the presence of a third man in the boat in addition to Jesus and Peter, probably Andrew (5:5–7). For "when they had this done, they inclosed a great multitude of fishes" (verse 6). How big is the catch? The large net—likely a deep sea (trammel) or seine (drag) net—begins to break. In desperation, Peter yells to James and John, to come and assist. Although the record does not specify, I can imagine the Savior, who was used to working with His hands, reaching out to help Peter with the bursting net of fish. In the end, after a lot of work, the fishermen heave the catch of fish into the two boats, almost sinking them. Peter's response leaves little doubt that he recognizes the power of the teacher from Nazareth. He falls "down at Jesus' knees, saying, Depart from me; for I am a sinful man, O Lord." But Peter does not yet grasp all that the Savior is

offering to him and his partners. That comes in the next few hours.

We might be tempted to think of this

haul of fish as modest. However, we do have a model to compare the craft against. In 1986 an ancient boat dating to around the first century was discovered along the northwest shore of the Sea of Galilee. That boat measures 26.5 feet (8.8 meters) x 7.5 feet (2.5 meters), is 4.5 feet (1.25 meters) deep, and consists of a number of different woods in its construction.<sup>1</sup> This craft can carry a very large load of fish. Two boats filled in this manner will supply the needs of the fishermen's families for months if not a couple of years. Even if Peter's boat is smaller than this contemporary example, the catch of fish will have been substantial if it nearly sinks his craft and his partners' as well.

The question naturally arises, is the miracle simply an amazing demonstration of Jesus's enormous powers over the world of nature, or does the catch of fish carry an additional purpose? This question, in my view, brings us face to face with Jesus's deep compassion and concern for the families of the fishermen. And it is answered by deducing the answer to another question: what do they do with all that fish?

Even though Luke writes that the partners "brought their ships to land" and then "they forsook all" (Luke 5:11), we need not think that they promptly beach their craft on the shore, while the miracle is still buzzing in their heads, and walk away from the huge catch of fish. Such an act is senseless waste. And they of all people know the value of a

big haul of fish. No, I believe that there is more going on here than meets the eye. Here is where a geographical detail plays a role.

Strabo, an ancient geographer who is roughly contemporary with Jesus (64 B.C.–21 A.D.), when writing about the Sea of Galilee, observes almost off-handedly, “At the place called Taricheae the lake supplies excellent fish for pickling.”<sup>2</sup> On the map of the lake, Taricheae lies about four-and-one-half miles (7.24 km) southwest of Capernaum, within easy rowing or sailing distance.<sup>3</sup> More importantly, the name of the town links directly to the Greek word *tarichos* which means “dried or smoked fish.”<sup>4</sup> The later rabbinic name for the town, Fish Tower, may also refer to the town’s fish salting industry.<sup>5</sup>

The town Taricheae, the fish-salting center on the lake’s western shore, was known to all the fishermen of the day. The effort to row or sail the two loaded boats four-and-one-half miles (7.24 km) along the shore from Capernaum would have cost a little time and effort, and the expense of the salting service, but not much else. With this huge catch of fish preserved by salting, the families of the fishermen would have enough food to eat for months on end, as well as enough to bring to the marketplace in Capernaum—either



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to trade for other foods or to sell for income.

As He calls Peter, Andrew, James, and John, Jesus is calling the breadwinners away from their families, who will struggle for food and income without these men. For the Master “who notes the sparrow’s fall”<sup>6</sup> and causes the rain to descend, and who is always aware of our needs, it is not hard to imagine Him compassionately doing more for these men and their families than meets the eye, as He so often does in our lives. In one stunning, momentous miracle witnessed by men whom Jesus will soon call into the apostleship, the needs of these families are met. The Savior’s

love for these men and His appreciation for what they will do in His service extends beyond them to their families. Thus, to me at least, the lesson of the Savior’s love and compassion becomes that much more deep and rich. ■

#### NOTES

1. Shelley Wachsmann, *The Sea of Galilee Boat: An Extraordinary 2000-Year-Old Discovery* (1995), 252, 302.
2. Strabo, *Geography*, 16.2.45.
3. Yohanan Aharoni, Michael Avi-Yonah, Anson F. Rainey, and Ze’ev Safrai, *The Carta Bible Atlas* (2002), 234–35.
4. Henry George Liddel and Robert Scott, *A Greek–English Lexicon*, rev. ed. (1940), 1758.
5. Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Anchor Bible: The Gospel According to Luke (I–IX)* (1981), 1:697.
6. Thomas S. Monson, “The Gift of Compassion,” *Liahona and Ensign*, Mar. 2007, 10.