

FISH

If you have ever been fishing with a rod and line you will know the thrill of getting a fish on the hook and feeling its pull to escape from you. Eventually, God willing, you will have the satisfaction of landing it and even eating it for supper. This feeling is mentioned in Habakkuk 1:14–15 concerning the plundering nation of Babylon that catches men to make them slaves: “And makest men as the fishes of the sea, as the creeping things, that have no ruler over them? They take up all of them with the angle, they catch them in their net, and gather them in their drag: therefore they rejoice and are glad.” These verses use words to describe the two main methods of fishing—name—the net and the angle (or rod and line).

Fish are amazing creatures ranging in size from the microscopic in plankton to the giant whale shark that dwarfs man. The fastest fish such as the marlin can reach speeds of 70mph. Indeed, the Hebrew word for fish—*dag* or *dagah*—means swift.

We first read of water creatures in Genesis 1:20, according to which God made everything in the waters from plankton and shrimp to blue whales, the biggest animal ever to live on earth. In Leviticus 11:9 we are told that all fish with fins and scales are to be eaten, and we all know that they are a tasty alternative to poultry, beef, and mutton (see 1 Corinthians 15:39). Fish oils are a valuable source of healthy fatty acids.

Jonah was miraculously swallowed and preserved from certain drowning by a great fish that later vomited him onto dry land after he had repented—a true story picturing our salvation.

Fish are wonderfully adapted to aquatic life. Their bodies are perfectly streamlined and slippery, covered in scales and slime to allow them to propel themselves with their muscular bodies and tails through their dense water environment. Unlike us, they have gills that have a massive surface area of membrane filled with blood, which absorbs dissolved oxygen from the water. My son just found this out by experience when he put a lot of small stickleback in a bottle and put on the lid. When he went to pour them out into his pond, they were all dead, suffocated for lack of the oxygen they had all used up. Many fish also have a swim bladder that can be filled or emptied of oxygen, which through changing the fish’s buoyancy makes it sink or float higher in the water. Their fins are strategically placed to aid change of depth and direction. Their sensitive lateral line picks up movement and vibration in the

water and converts this into electrical impulses used in shoaling, avoiding predators and orientating their bodies. Their large eyes set on the sides of their heads are necessary to see predators. Amazingly, some live in fresh and some in salt water, and others such as salmon can live in both. Fresh water fish differ physiologically from salt water fish in several respects. Their gills must be able to diffuse dissolved gasses while keeping the salts in the body fluids inside. Their scales reduce water diffusion through the skin: freshwater fish that have lost too many scales will die. They also have well-developed kidneys to reclaim salts from body fluids before excretion. Many species of fish do reproduce in freshwater, but spend most of their adult lives in the sea. These include salmon and sea trout. On the contrary, other kinds of fish are born in salt water, but live most of or parts of their adult lives in fresh water, as do the eels.

Species migrating between marine and fresh waters need adaptations for both environments; when in salt water they need to keep their bodily salt concentration lower than that of their surroundings, and vice versa. Many species solve this problem by associating different habitats with different stages of life. Both eels and salmon have different tolerances for salinity in different stages of their lives.

Fishing in the Old Testament is a picture of judgment on nations and individuals, according to the verses from Habakkuk quoted above, as well as from such passages as Jeremiah 16:16–18: “Behold, I will send for many fishers, saith the LORD, and they shall fish them; and after will I send for many hunters, and they shall hunt them from every mountain, and from every hill, and out of the holes of the rocks. For mine eyes are upon all their ways: they are not hid from my face, neither is their iniquity hid from mine eyes. And first I will recompense their iniquity and their sin double; because they have defiled my land, they have filled mine inheritance with the carcasses of their detestable and abominable things.”

Contrariwise, in the New Testament fishing is a picture of the gathering of the elect into the church.

The Greek word for fish is *ICTHYS*, which the early Christians used as a mnemonic because its letters are the initial letters of Iesous Christos Theou Hyios Soter (Jesus Christ, of God the Son, Saviour) The fish was an early Christian symbol and remains one today.

Fish are an important topic in the New Testament because as many as seven of the disciples were fishermen, namely, Peter, Andrew, James, John, Thomas, Nathaniel, and possibly Philip who was from Peter's home town of Bethsaida (John 21:2). These men fished the Sea of Galilee with their boats and nets.

Our Lord twice fed large crowds using bread and a few small fish, according to Matthew 14 and 15. He also told Peter to go angling in the sea to land a specific fish with a coin in its mouth to pay his taxes. The first meal the risen Lord ate consisted boiled fish and honeycomb (Luke 23:42), and later he cooked a meal of fish and bread by the sea (John 21:9–13) just after the miraculous draught of 153 fish, which pictured the gathering of the exact number of the elect from all nations.

Christ's disciples and we are called to become fishers of men by net and rod. The net spread wide is like Pentecost, the mass crowd listening to preaching. The widespread distribution of literature and of the gospel by hard copy and the internet is like the rod, the work of believers as individuals seeking to "hook" others among our unbelieving friends and family. Fish are attracted to a lure, and our lives ought to attract them to Christ so they can be drawn in and brought to land safely in the church of Christ.

Christ assures us that by following him (and practically that means obeying the Scriptures) he will make us fishers of men. Just as the disciples worked as a team on the lake so do we in our churches in local outreach evangelism and praying with and for our brothers' and sisters' witness. According to Philippians 1:27 (striving together for the faith of the gospel) and Romans 15:30 (strive together with me in your prayers to God for me), we pray especially for our church ministers and the needed fishermen for the worldwide catch, because even today the nets and angling lines need to be cast out to many people—groups in the world where presently there are no fishermen. Are you praying for the nets and lines to be cast where never before? Are you supporting the fishermen in prayer and are you personally involved with fishing for men?

We all need to be!