

THE FORTY DAYS · POST TWO OF FOUR

<p>POST 1</p> <p>A City That Did Not Know</p> <p><i>Days 1–8 · Jerusalem · Thomas</i></p>	<p>POST 2</p> <p>The Shore at Dawn</p> <p><i>Days 9–20 · Galilee · Peter · James</i></p>	<p>POST 3</p> <p>The Kingdom in the Margins</p> <p><i>Acts 1:3 · The Great Commission</i></p>	<p>POST 4</p> <p>The Hill and the Hands</p> <p><i>Day 40 · The Ascension</i></p>
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The Shore at Dawn

Going Back to What You Knew · The Sea of Galilee · The Charcoal Fire · Three Questions

Days 9–20 After the Resurrection · The Galilee Period

John 21:4, 7 (ESV)

“Just as day was breaking, Jesus stood on the shore; yet the disciples did not know that it was Jesus... That disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, ‘It is the Lord.’ When Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he put on his outer garment, for he was stripped for work, and threw himself into the sea.”

THE JOURNEY

Going Home — Why Galilee?

At some point in the first two weeks after the resurrection, the disciples left Jerusalem and walked north. Ninety miles through the Jordan valley, through the heat of the rift, climbing finally into the green hills of Galilee. They had walked it with Jesus six weeks before, full of expectation. Now they walked it back.

Three separate instructions had pointed the same direction — before the death, at the empty tomb, and after the resurrection — all saying the same thing: *North. Home. Galilee.* Not Jerusalem, the centre of institutional authority. Back to the margins. Back to the lake where the Kingdom had first been announced not in the Temple courts but on a hillside beside the water.

THE SETTING

The Lake They Had Always Known

The Sea of Galilee — a freshwater lake thirteen miles long, sitting two hundred metres below sea level — was one of the most productive fishing waters in the known world. Josephus reported 230 fishing boats working it simultaneously. The towns on its shores were prosperous fishing centres; salted Galilean fish were exported across the Roman Empire. This was not a hobby for the disciples who were fishermen. It was serious, skilled,

commercially demanding work.

This lake was also dense with memory. It was where Jesus had first called Peter, Andrew, James and John. Where he had stilled the storm. Where he had walked on the water. Where he had fed five thousand people on the hillside above the northern shore. Every mile of coastline carried a story. Returning here was returning to the beginning of everything.

“In 1986, during a drought that lowered the lake’s level, archaeologists discovered a first-century wooden fishing boat preserved in the lakeshore mud. Twenty-seven feet long, large enough for thirteen men, with evidence of many repairs suggesting years of commercial use. It is the kind of boat the disciples would have used. It makes the story physical.”

THE NIGHT

A Long Night Catching Nothing

“I am going fishing,” Peter said. And they all went with him.

Peter — who had been in the locked room when Jesus breathed the Holy Spirit on the disciples, who had received a private resurrection appearance, who had been appointed the rock — was going to get a boat and go out on the water and catch fish. The occupation he had left behind three years ago when a man on the shore said “Follow me.”

What was he doing? Was it abandonment of the call? Practical necessity? Or something harder to name: the instinct to return to the familiar when the unfamiliar has proved too overwhelming, too large, too transforming? When everything has changed, sometimes you go back to what your hands know.

Seven of them fished through the dark hours. They caught nothing. All night. The professional fishermen who had given three years to follow a rabbi had apparently also lost their ability to catch fish. In the grey light of dawn, a man appeared on the shore.

John 21:5

“Children, do you have any fish?” — Paidia — not ‘men’ or ‘disciples’ but something warmer, more familial. The address of someone who cared for these tired men in a parental way.

PETER

The Man Who Could Not Wait

John saw and understood. Peter heard John say “It is the Lord” — and did something that was very Peter. He put his outer garment on and threw himself into the sea. Not into a boat. Not waiting for the others to row in. He jumped into the water and swam a hundred yards to shore.

He had last seen Jesus looking at him across a courtyard as a rooster crowed. The memory had not left him. And now the Lord was standing on the shore, and Peter's body made the decision before his mind could second-guess it.

John 21:9

When they got out on land, they saw a charcoal fire in place, with fish laid out on it, and bread. — Anthrakia. A charcoal fire. John chose that word deliberately.

THE FIRST FIRE

John 18:18

The courtyard of the High Priest's house. Night. A charcoal fire, lit against the cold. Peter standing beside it, warming himself. Three times the question came: "Aren't you also one of his disciples?" Three times the answer: "I am not." A rooster crowed. Jesus looked across the courtyard. Peter went out and wept bitterly.

THE SECOND FIRE

John 21:9

The shore of the Sea of Galilee. Dawn. A charcoal fire, already burning when Peter arrived. Fish laid on it. Bread. Jesus, sitting beside it, waiting. *He had built this fire before they came.* He had chosen this exact word — *anthrakia* — to make certain Peter would feel the weight of the echo. The second fire was the answer to the first.

■ **ανθρακι** ■
Anthrakia · Charcoal Fire · Appears only twice in the New Testament

John 18:18 — Peter's denial. John 21:9 — the lakeside restoration. The same specific, uncommon word, in both places, both in John's Gospel, both connected to Peter. John did not use this detail accidentally. He was one of the most careful literary craftsmen in the New Testament. He wanted you to feel the weight of that second fire — the deliberate, prepared echo of the first. Restoration often requires returning to the site and the form of the original wound. You go back. You answer the question three times. The fire bears witness to both the breaking and the mending.

THE BREAKFAST

Come and Have Breakfast

Jesus said: "Come and have breakfast."

None of the disciples dared ask "Who are you?" — they knew it was the Lord. And yet something about the encounter was different enough that the question hovered, unasked. The risen body was recognisably him but not simply him as he had been. Recognition came through the whole person — through the miracle of the net, through the word from the shore, through the fire, through the bread he took and gave.

He took the bread and gave it to them. He did the same with the fish. The eucharistic echo is impossible to miss — the same gesture, the same structure, as the Last Supper and the feeding of the five thousand. At every

table, in every act of bread broken and given, Jesus was showing them how the Kingdom worked: he provides, he gives, they receive.

“This is one of the most underrated scenes in the entire New Testament. Not a locked room, not a theological statement, not a commission. Just breakfast. Just the Lord eating with his people, on an ordinary morning, by the water he had always known.”

THE 153 FISH

Why Does John Count Them?

The precision — not “many” or “about 150” but exactly 153 — has fascinated readers for two thousand years and produced an extraordinary range of interpretations. The most credible are worth knowing:

INTERPRETER	INTERPRETATION	SIGNIFICANCE
Jerome (4th century)	Greek zoologists catalogued 153 species of fish in the known world	The catch represents every kind of person the mission would reach. The unbroken net = the Church holding all kinds without tearing.
Augustine (4th century)	153 is the 17th triangular number (sum of 1–17). $17 = 10$ (Law) + 7 (Spirit)	The full number of God’s people gathered in — Law fulfilled and completed by the Spirit’s gifts.
The Eyewitness Reading	John counted them because he was there. No one invents 153.	<i>The specificity is the signature of eyewitness memory. “Many fish” is legend. “153” is someone who was in the boat.</i>

All three interpretations may be true simultaneously. The risen Christ has a way of making specific historical events carry multiple layers of meaning. The fish were real. The count was real. And John saw all the symbolic resonance and included it because it was all true at once.

THE RESTORATION

Three Questions by a Charcoal Fire

After breakfast, Jesus spoke to Peter. Not to all of them — to Peter. The man who had denied him three times by a charcoal fire in the High Priest’s courtyard. Before unpacking the three questions, one thing needs to be said about the Greek that most sermons get wrong:

THE POPULAR READING

Jesus asks “do you *agapao* me?” twice (unconditional, divine love) and Peter answers “I *phileo* you” (mere brotherly affection). On the third question Jesus drops to Peter’s level and uses *phileo*. Preached as a story about God meeting us where we are.

WHAT THE SCHOLARS SAY

F.F. Bruce, D.A. Carson, Raymond Brown and most modern NT scholars point out that John uses *agapao* and *phileo* **interchangeably** throughout his Gospel. John 3:35 says the Father *agapa* the Son; John 5:20 says the Father *phile* the Son — same relationship, different word. The real signal is not the word for love. It is the charcoal fire. It is the number three. The symmetry is the restoration.

First Question

John 21:15

“Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?”

The old name — Simon, not Peter. The comparison ‘more than these’ quietly excavates Peter’s boast that he alone would not fall away. Jesus said: “Feed my lambs.” The mission began before the wound was fully dressed.

Second Question

John 21:16

“Simon, son of John, do you love me?”

The comparison has been dropped. No ‘more than these’ — just the bare question. The field has narrowed to the one thing that matters: *do you love me?* Jesus said: “Tend my sheep.” The imagery shifts from lambs to the whole flock.

Third Question

John 21:17

“Simon, son of John, do you love me?”

Peter was grieved because of the third question. Not the word for love — the number. Three questions for three denials. Three answers for three betrayals. Jesus said: “Feed my sheep.” Then he told Peter what following him would cost.

John 21:18 (ESV)

“Truly, truly, I say to you, when you were young, you used to dress yourself and walk wherever you wanted, but when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and another will dress you and carry you where you do not want to go.”

“Follow me.”

John 21:19 · The Shore of the Sea of Galilee · The Second Calling

The same two words, on the same lake, to the same man. But the first time Peter had no idea what following would cost. The second time he had just been told he would die with his hands stretched out, carried somewhere he did not want to go. This second yes cost more and meant more, because Peter knew what he was saying. This is what the whole forty days was doing to the disciples: transforming naive, enthusiastic followers into people who could say yes to Jesus with their eyes open, knowing what it would eventually require.

Five Hundred Witnesses — and a Brother Who Finally Believed

The lakeside restoration of Peter is the centrepiece of the Galilee period, but it was not all that happened in those northern weeks. Paul's list in 1 Corinthians 15 records two additional appearances that belong to this phase — and together they constitute the most widely witnessed and historically important encounters of the whole forty days.

APPEARANCE	WHAT HAPPENED · WHY IT MATTERS
The Five Hundred 1 Cor 15:6	The largest single post-resurrection appearance. More than 500 people in broad daylight on a Galilean hillside. Paul adds a parenthetical almost unique in ancient historical writing: “most of whom are still alive” — i.e., you can check this. Written ~55 AD, ~25 years after the events. This is not the rhetoric of mythology. Mythology does not offer living witnesses to verify against.
James 1 Cor 15:7	No details. No conversation recorded. Just the bare fact. But the outcome was dramatic: the man who thought his brother was insane (Mark 3:21), who had not believed during the ministry (John 7:5), became the leader of the Jerusalem church, wrote an epistle still read today, and was martyred around 62 AD for refusing to deny the resurrection. You do not die for a lie your brother told you.

“James’s conversion from the man who thought his brother was insane to the leader who died for that brother’s resurrection is one of the strongest single arguments for the historical reality of the appearances. You do not die for a lie your brother told you.”

WHAT WE USUALLY MISS

Five Depths in the Familiar Story

1. The two charcoal fires are the most important detail in John 21

The word *anthrakia* — charcoal fire — appears only twice in the entire New Testament: John 18:18 (Peter’s denial) and John 21:9 (the lakeside breakfast). John chose this specific, uncommon word both times deliberately. Restoration often requires returning to the site and form of the original wound. You cannot simply move forward as if the denial never happened. You go back, and you answer the question three times, and the fire bears witness to both the breaking and the mending.

2. Peter was restored before he was commissioned — not commissioned despite being unrestored

The order of John 21 matters enormously. Jesus did not say: “Peter, despite what happened, here is your commission.” He said: “Simon, do you love me?” Three times. Only after three declarations of love, freely given over a meal, did the commission come. Many churches have this order wrong — they commission people who have not yet been restored, and wonder why they lead from a wound rather than from wholeness. Restoration precedes commission. Always.

3. Five hundred witnesses in broad daylight is the most evidentially significant appearance

Paul's mention of 500 witnesses with the note that most were still alive when he wrote (1 Corinthians 15:6, ~55 AD) is the most extraordinary evidentiary claim in the New Testament. He was saying: *if you want to verify this, there are hundreds of people who were there, and most of them are still reachable*. This is not the rhetoric of mythology. Mythology does not offer living witnesses to check against.

4. "Follow me" at the end means something completely different from the first time

The first "Follow me" was accepted in enthusiasm, with no foreknowledge of cost. The second was accepted immediately after being told he would die with his hands stretched out. The same two words, on the same lake, to the same man — but the second call was accepted with full knowledge of its cost. The forty days were transforming naive followers into people who could say yes with their eyes open.

5. The appearance to James is one of the strongest historical arguments for the resurrection

James was not a follower. He had publicly opposed his brother. He was not in the grief-stricken inner circle. He had nothing to gain and everything to lose. Yet within a few years James was leading the Jerusalem church and willing to die for it. The criteria historians use — multiple early attestation, embarrassing details, willing martyrdom — all point the same direction: something happened to James that completely overturned his prior scepticism. The only thing he ever claimed happened to him was that his dead brother appeared to him alive.

Study & Reflection

Peter went back to fishing — returning to the familiar when everything had changed. Is there something in your own life that you go back to when things feel uncertain or overwhelming? What does Jesus’s response — coming to meet Peter exactly there, on the water, in the work — tell you about how he relates to the places we retreat to?

John 21:3 · Isaiah 43:18–19 · Philippians 3:13

The charcoal fire Jesus built deliberately echoed the fire beside which Peter denied him. Is there a place, a memory, a repeated situation in your own life where you carry an old failure? What would it mean for Jesus to meet you in that specific place, with that specific fire, and ask the same question until it was healed?

John 21:9 · John 18:18 · Psalm 103:12

Jesus restored Peter before he commissioned him. The love question came first, the work followed from it. Is there a way you are trying to serve or lead for God from a place of unresolved guilt? What would it look like to receive the three-question restoration before the commission?

John 21:15–17 · 1 John 4:19 · Romans 8:1

James spent three years opposing his brother and one private encounter with the risen Christ made him willing to die for him. What is the one thing, if you encountered it directly, that would change everything for you? What does James’s story tell you about the difference between inherited belief and personally encountered faith?

1 Corinthians 15:7 · John 7:5 · Acts 15:13

Jesus told Peter the cost before renewing the call: “when you are old, another will carry you where you do not want to go” — then said “Follow me.” How does knowing the cost change what it means to say yes? Are you following with a clear view of what it might require, or with an unspoken assumption it won’t be too expensive?

John 21:18–19 · Luke 9:23 · Philippians 1:21

“Come and have breakfast.” In the middle of the mission and the predictions of martyrdom, Jesus made a fire and cooked fish. What does the breakfast by the lake tell you about what Jesus thinks ordinary life and ordinary needs are worth? Where do you experience the risen Christ in the ordinary — in meals, in morning light, in the familiar work?

John 21:12 · Luke 24:30–31 · Acts 2:42

Key Scriptures

John 21 · John 18:18 · 1 Corinthians 15:3–8 · Matthew 26:32 · Matthew 28:10 · Mark 3:21 · John 7:5 · Acts 1:14 · Galatians 2:9 · Isaiah 43:18–19

“When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, ‘Simon, son of John, do you love me?’ ... He said to him, ‘Feed my sheep.’”

John 21:15, 17 · The Shore at Dawn · The Forty Days · Post 2 of 4

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