

Chapter 44: The Shepherds of Jesus

John 21:1–25

As we come to John 21, the last chapter of this Gospel, the Evangelist has now written twenty chapters of signs so that we “may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing [we] may have life in his name” (John 20:31). John’s testimony to the person and work of Jesus is complete, demonstrating thoroughly that Jesus is the Anointed One of God and the Son sent from the Father to accomplish redemption for all those whom the Father is giving to the Son. Along with the other three Synoptic Gospels, we have a sufficient, multifaceted depiction of Jesus. So, while we do not have all the details we may care to have, we have everything we need to come to faith in Jesus for salvation through the power of the Holy Spirit. In the last chapter of the Gospel, John does not need to add one single word to the testimony concerning Jesus himself.

Instead, John clarifies the nature of the commission that Jesus gave his disciples on the day of his resurrection: “As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you” (John 20:21). On that day, Jesus also breathed on them so that they received the Holy Spirit for carrying out that work (John 20:22). Even so, we still have many questions. What exactly is Jesus asking his disciples to do? Will the disciples of Jesus actually be able to accomplish that work? What about their weaknesses, limitations, and failures? Peter denied knowing Jesus on the night of the crucifixion, but why should we think that he will be the only disciple who will ever fall into temptation? Who among us has ever been sufficient to the task that Jesus has entrusted to us (cf. 2 Cor. 2:16)? In this final chapter, John acknowledges and answers our concerns about a humbling reality: *Jesus entrusts his flock to faltering shepherds.*

Out of our Fruitlessness, Jesus Calls us to Fish for His People (John 21:1–14)

Before we can answer these questions, though, we need to understand how John 21 relates to the rest of the Gospel, since, at first glance, this last chapter seems disconnected from everything else John writes.¹ First, the immediately preceding verses in John 20:30–31 undoubtedly form a conclusion to the main part of the Gospel: “Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.” What more does John need to say? Second, John never mentions himself by name throughout the entirety of the Gospel (cf. 1:35–41; 13:23; 18:15; 19:25–27, 35; 20:2–10), but John 21:2 includes “the sons of Zebedee” (that is, James and John) in the list of disciples who went with Peter on the fishing trip. Third, the description contained in John 21:20 (“the disciple whom Jesus loved...the one who also had leaned back against him during the supper and had said, ‘Lord, who is it that is going to betray you?’”) is significantly different from the other modest references to John in the rest of the Gospel.

These specific issues, along with a few minor stylistic differences, prompt many scholars to assign the authorship of John 21 to a different person altogether, insisting that John did not write it. Even

many conservative scholars, however, believe that the Evangelist did not add this chapter until much later, most likely at the prompting of elders in the Ephesian church toward the end of his life.² Nevertheless, Andreas Köstenberger points to several key pieces of evidence to argue not only that the Apostle John wrote John 21, but that John 21 is essential to the theological and literary structure of the book.³ Most persuasively, Köstenberger demonstrates that this final chapter functions as an epilogue to balance out the prologue in John 1:1–18. Just as the prologue introduced several critical themes that John expounded through the rest of the Gospel, so the epilogue ties up several loose threads that need resolution, including the relationship between Peter and the beloved disciple (John 21:7, 20–23) and the actual identification of the beloved disciple (John 20:24). These threads establish strong links between John 1–20 and John 21, so that Köstenberger can judge any supposed stylistic differences as insignificant in light of the overall unity. Without this epilogue, Köstenberger goes so far as to say that the Gospel would end too abruptly after Jesus' appearance to Thomas. Finally, Köstenberger reminds us that we do not have a single manuscript that omits John 21, which strongly suggests that the church never knew the Gospel of John without this final epilogue.

In a similar vein, D. A. Carson observes that an author is not bound to end a narrative immediately after its climax:

True, John 20:30–31 is the climax of the book, the ‘conclusion’ in that sense. But as in a ‘whodunit’ where all the pieces have finally come together in a magnificent act of disclosure, there remains certain authorial discretion: the book may end abruptly with the act of disclosure, the solution to the mystery, or it may wind down through a postscript that tells what happens to the characters, especially if what happens to them sheds a certain light backward onto the principal plot of the work.⁴

In my judgment, the approach of Carson and Köstenberger is the best way to understand this last chapter. John has closed out his testimony of the “signs” of Jesus that should lead us to believe that he is the Christ, the Son of God (John 20:30–31), but his Gospel needs this last chapter as an epilogue. Specifically, this last chapter has less to do with bearing witness to Jesus himself as to the nature of the ministry of Jesus' church after his ascension.

A Fishing Trip

John opens this last chapter with the simple transition of “After this,” which he does at several points in the Gospel (e.g., 3:22; 5:1; 6:1; 7:1).⁵ He writes:

[1] After this Jesus revealed himself again to the disciples by the Sea of Tiberias, and he revealed himself in this way. [2] Simon Peter, Thomas (called the Twin), Nathanael of Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two others of his disciples were together. [3] Simon Peter said to them, “I am going fishing.” They said to him, “We will go with you.” They went out and got into the boat, but that night they caught nothing. (John 21:1–3)

The word “revealed” (sometimes translated “manifested”) is a word that John uses seventeen times in his writings, with six other occurrences in the Gospel of John before this point.⁶ Nevertheless, it is not a common word used in the New Testament to describe Jesus' resurrection appearances (John

does not use this word in John 20), and it does not appear anywhere in the Synoptic Gospels.⁷ Instead, John uses this word to describe the revelation and manifestation of Jesus in his glory. For example, John the Baptist came “that he might be *revealed* to Israel” (John 1:31); through his miracle at the wedding feast of Cana, Jesus “*manifested* his glory” (John 2:11); and in his high priestly prayer, Jesus insists, “I have *manifested* your name” (John 17:6).⁸ John now uses this word to frame the story of this encounter at the Sea of Tiberias by telling us twice that Jesus “revealed” himself to his disciples (John 21:1, 14). The list of disciples John provides (Simon Peter, Thomas, Nathanael of Cana, the sons of Zebedee, and two other disciples) confirms that this is a specific, historical event rather than an “undefined ‘once upon a time’” fairy tale.⁹ From John 21:14, we learn that this event takes place after Jesus’ resurrection, but (by implication) before his ascension: “This was now the third time that Jesus was revealed to the disciples after he was raised from the dead.” That is, this event happens some time in the forty day window Luke describes in Acts 1:3.

At Peter’s suggestion, the disciples listed in this passage decide to go fishing together. By fishing, are the disciples abandoning the commission that Jesus gave them when he appeared to them after his resurrection? Many condemn this trip as outright apostasy, but John almost certainly does not suggest this. Much more likely, John intends us to see that, “The disciples made use of free time...As in other passages in the Gospel (e.g., 2:1–11; 5:6–8; 6:5–12), Jesus does care about “mundane” needs and provides for others through their obedience to his commands (e.g., 2:7; 5:8–9; 6:10–12).”¹⁰ Even so, the reactions against the disciples in the passage have been so severe as to prompt George Beasley-Murray to exclaim, “Never has a fishing trip been so severely judged!...Even though Jesus be crucified and risen from the dead, the disciples must still *eat!*”¹¹ Beasley-Murray’s point is valid. Do we criticize Jesus so harshly for multiplying the fish and loaves for the crowd (John 6:1–14)? Although the disciples had received the Holy Spirit through the breath of Jesus to equip them for their ministry (John 20:22), Jesus has not yet poured out his Spirit on all flesh at Pentecost:

By breathing on him [Peter], Jesus had ordained him to be an Apostle, as we saw a little before; but he abstained from the exercise of the apostleship for a short time, till he should be clothed with new power. For he had not yet been enjoined to appear in public for the discharge of his office of teaching, but had only been reminded of his future calling, that he and the others might understand that they had not in vain been chosen from the beginning. Meanwhile, they do what they were accustomed to do, and what belonged to men in private life.¹²

By training, these were fishermen; therefore, as they awaited further instructions and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, they supported themselves by fishing.

The notable event in this chapter, then, is *not* that the disciples go fishing, but that Jesus Christ reveals himself to the disciples *while* they were fishing. By comparison, the great Apostle Paul provided for many of his own needs with the labors of his hands through making tents (Acts 18:3, 20:34; 1 Cor. 4:12; 2 Cor. 12:16), although he also received financial support from churches who partnered with him for the gospel (2 Cor. 11:8; Phil. 4:15). Paul tells us several times that he continues to labor with his hands, but we do not have any stories of that work as we do with this fishing expedition. Nevertheless, if the resurrected Lord Jesus appeared to Paul in the way that he reveals himself to the disciples, then we perhaps *could* have received a story that catches Paul in the

middle of sewing. Peter supports himself through fishing just as Paul does through tent-making. While we should seek, if possible, to relieve ministers from the necessity of working in worldly vocations so they can devote themselves to the word of God and to prayer (cf. Acts 6:2–4), this is often not an option in some churches, even today. Should these ministers therefore starve? The idea that the disciples should not have worked with their hands to feed themselves is absurd.

The Provision of Jesus

We should not, though, miss that last phrase from John 21:3: “but that night they caught nothing.” There was nothing wrong with going fishing, but their efforts were not successful. Köstenberger observes, “Remarkably, the disciples never catch a fish in any of the Gospels without Jesus’ help.”¹³ As in all the other fishing expeditions, the disciples here put in a long night of labor but have nothing to show for it. John continues:

[4] Just as day was breaking, Jesus stood on the shore; yet the disciples did not know that it was Jesus. [5] Jesus said to them, “Children, do you have any fish?” They answered him, “No.” [6] He said to them, “Cast the net on the right side of the boat, and you will find some.” So they cast it, and now they were not able to haul it in, because of the quantity of fish. (John 21:4–6)

As in the case of Mary Magdalene (John 20:14), the disciples do not know that they are speaking to Jesus—and, as with the story of Mary’s encounter with Jesus, John does not tell us here exactly *why* the disciples do not know that it is Jesus. A variety of explanations have been suggested, ranging from the difficulty of seeing Jesus in the morning haze to the more supernatural sense that Jesus prevented them from recognizing him at first.¹⁴

Jesus reveals himself, then, by directing the disciples to fish on the other side of the boat, much as he had done when he first called the disciples, according to Luke 5:1–11. Significantly, after performing that first fishing miracle, Jesus told the disciples, “Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching men” (Luke 5:10). In both stories, Jesus uses fishing as an illustration for the work of ministry that he is sending them to do. In the earlier story, Jesus was explaining what he was calling them to do. As we will see through the remainder of this study, Jesus is using their fishing to demonstrate that their ministry as fishers of men will be fruitless apart from his provision.

The Revelation of Jesus

It is at this point that the disciples begin to recognize Jesus:

[7] That disciple whom Jesus loved therefore 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. [8] The other disciples came in the boat, dragging the net full of fish, for they were not far from the land, but about a hundred yards off. (John 21:7–8)

Jesus performs a miracle here not only in providing a net full of fish, but also in preserving the net through the strain of the great weight of the fish (John 21:11).¹⁵ Perhaps also because John (“that disciple whom Jesus loved”) remembered how much this event resembled the day when Jesus first

called him to be a disciple, John declares to Peter, “It is the Lord!” Then, when Peter hears the news (apparently, Peter did not realize this for himself), he put on his outer garment and jumped into the sea toward Jesus. Once again, we see the dynamic between Peter and John that we should now well recognize: “Peter is a man of action. He generally *acts* before John does. John generally *understands* before Peter does.”¹⁶ Although Peter was the one to instigate the fishing outing (John 21:3), he now abandons the boat and the great catch of fish without hesitation to seek his Lord (John 21:7), leaving the rest of the disciples to drag the net full of fish toward the shore (John 21:8).

Breakfast with Jesus

Although the disciples have just brought in a huge haul of fish, their fish are not needed for their breakfast with Jesus. When they arrive, they find that Jesus has already prepared their meal:

[9] When they got out on land, they saw a charcoal fire in place, with fish laid out on it, and bread. [10] Jesus said to them, “Bring some of the fish that you have just caught.” [11] So Simon Peter went aboard and hauled the net ashore, full of large fish, 153 of them. And although there were so many, the net was not torn. [12] Jesus said to them, “Come and have breakfast.” Now none of the disciples dared ask him, “Who are you?” They knew it was the Lord. [13] Jesus came and took the bread and gave it to them, and so with the fish. [14] This was now the third time that Jesus was revealed to the disciples after he was raised from the dead. (John 21:9–14)

John does not tell us precisely how much food Jesus prepared for the disciples, and it is possible that the words for “fish” and “bread” in John 21:9 are written in the singular (“a fish” and “a [cake of] bread”) rather than to describe an indefinite quantity.¹⁷ The man who multiplied five barley loaves and two fish into enough food to feed five thousand people with twelve baskets of leftover fragments left over (John 6:1–14) does not need to start with a great quantity to feed these few, hungry disciples. Furthermore, Jesus’ command to “Bring some of the fish that you have just caught” is probably better understood as describing the process of *separating out* the large fish (“some of the fish”) from the small fish, so that only 153 “large” fish remain after the separation (John 21:10). In other words, Jesus is not asking the disciples to add the fish they have caught to the food he has prepared; he is simply telling them to finish their work before coming to breakfast.¹⁸ The disciples do not question the command, the meal they receive, or the man who is speaking to them and serving them (John 21:12). It is not that they are afraid to ask, but simply that they know beyond all doubt that this is indeed Jesus.¹⁹

Once again, Peter is at the center of the story. Peter was the one to organize the fishing trip (John 21:3), but then he abandoned his catch when he realized that Jesus was on the shore (John 21:7). Now that Jesus tells the disciples to finish up their work, Peter is the one to return back onto the boat to haul the fish ashore. The entire fishing party (minus Peter) was not strong enough to haul in the catch of fish, but John tells us that Peter now does it himself—either because the catch has been lightened by removing the smaller fish, or perhaps in the sense that Peter “organized the hauling of the net to shore rather than that he did it all by himself.”²⁰ In this first part of the chapter, the *fishing* of Peter is the focal point; in the next part, it will be to the *shepherding* of Peter that Jesus will draw our attention.

Jesus not only invites his disciples to “Come and have breakfast” (John 21:12), but John tells us explicitly that Jesus himself serves his disciples: “Jesus came and took the bread and gave it to them, and so with the fish” (John 21:13). In comparison to the Synoptic Gospels, this language sounds somewhat similar to the institution of the Lord’s Supper (cf. Matt. 26:26–27; Mark 14:22–23; Luke 22:19, 20; 1 Cor. 11:23–25). Nevertheless, John is the only Gospel that does not describe the institution of the Lord’s Supper, so while he may be echoing its language, the Lord’s Supper itself is probably not in view. Within the context of the Gospel of John, this imagery of Jesus’ serving food to his disciples should instead remind us of the servanthood of Jesus when he washes his disciples’ feet (John 13:3–5). Notably, Peter does not now refuse food from the hands of Jesus, insisting rather that *he* be the one to serve Jesus (cf. John 13:6–9). Peter, so much at the center stage of this passage, is uncharacteristically silent as he passively receives the meal that Jesus gives to him.

A Paradigm for Fishers of People

Returning to our earlier question, we might ask once again why John finds this story so important to include in his epilogue. What makes this encounter so important? From a historical perspective, the fact that Jesus revealed himself three times to his disciples (the second time for Thomas) further confirms the validity of their testimony to have seen the resurrected Jesus (John 21:14). From a literary and theological perspective, however, this story of the fishing of the disciples says much about the mission that Jesus sends his disciples to do: out of our fruitlessness, Jesus calls us to fish for people.²¹ Our work will be fruitless apart from Jesus’ word and the Holy Spirit (John 20:22), but when Jesus pours out the Holy Spirit on all flesh on the day of Pentecost, the apostles will bring in the first haul of new disciples in great quantity (John 21:6; cf. Acts 2:1–41)—the first of many catches in a work of soul-fishing that continues to this very day. Nevertheless, we must never forget that even when we experience success in ministry, it is still Jesus who provides for our needs from day to day, moment by moment. Jesus provides the catch, so he does need our catch to provide for us. Instead, he will provide for us from his own, unlimited resources.

There are many other details from this first story that inform us about the nature of the ministry that Jesus entrusts to us, but we cannot see those details without continuing to read. So, let us turn our attention to the Lord’s conversation with Peter in the next section while keeping the story of the fishing trip in view.

Out of our Failure, Jesus Calls us to Feed His Flock (John 21:15–19)

After Peter’s threefold denial of Jesus on the night of his crucifixion (John 18:15–18, 25–27), Jesus must reconcile himself to Peter with a threefold affirmation. This conversation takes place not only for the sake of Peter’s peace of mind, and for the sake of the ministry that Jesus wants to entrust with Peter. From other portions of Scripture, we know that Jesus met with Peter individually on the day of his resurrection (Luke 24:34; 1 Cor. 15:5), although none of the biblical authors tell us what took place in that meeting.²² Regardless, that private conversation is not enough. Peter has publicly denied Jesus, so Jesus must now publicly forgive and reinstate Peter to his office.²³ John writes this:

[15] When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, “Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?” He said to him, “Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.” He

said to him, “Feed my lambs.” [16] He said to him a second time, “Simon, son of John, do you love me?” He said to him, “Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.” He said to him, “Tend my sheep.” [17] He said to him the third time, “Simon, son of John, do you love me?” Peter was grieved because he said to him the third time, “Do you love me?” and he said to him, “Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you.” Jesus said to him, “Feed my sheep.” (John 21:15–17)

As painful as this encounter is for Peter—particularly when Jesus asks him the *third* time whether he loves him (John 21:17)—it is necessary in order to move forward with the office and ministry that Jesus wants to give him.

“Do you love me?”

Jesus poses Simon Peter the single-most important question for ministry: “Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?” (John 21:15). We do not know what Jesus is referring to when he asks Peter, “do you love me *more than these*,” and it does not really matter.²⁴ Jesus is asking Peter for his unqualified love, and he asks the same thing of us today. For ministry, love is more important than skill, wisdom, experience, energy, strategic brilliance, or commanding presence. Unless we love Jesus, then we cannot serve those whom Jesus loves.

Many commentators insist that there is significance in the two different words for “love” in this exchange: *agapē* and *philē*. Lenski, for example, insists that *agapē* “is the love of intelligence, reason, and comprehension, coupled with corresponding purpose; in this its content it vastly outranks the other type of love,” while *philē* “expresses the love of mere personal affection or liking, including even the passions where the context requires, and no intelligence or high purpose is involved.”²⁵ In both verse 15 and 16, Jesus asks Peter about *agapē*, but Peter responds in terms of *philē*. Only in verse 17 does Jesus ask Peter about *philē* (Peter’s answer is still about *philē*). More recently, commentators have rejected this view for a variety of reasons, including the fact that Greek scholars who try to argue for a difference between the meaning of the two words cannot actually agree on what to make of that difference.²⁶ Beyond that, John seems to use the two words interchangeably in this Gospel, and he regularly uses synonyms for other words without trying to suggest fine distinctions between their meanings.²⁷ To build a detailed exposition of this passage from the different Greek words for *love*, then, is a shaky endeavor at best.

“Feed my sheep”

Three times, Jesus addresses Peter as “Simon, son of John” to remind Peter of his identity before Jesus met him and changed his name (John 1:42). In his denial, he “had shown himself only as Simon, son of John; he had been nothing of a Peter.”²⁸ In direct contrast with those denials, Jesus asks Peter three times whether Peter loves him. During the first two questions, Peter tells Jesus, “Yes, Lord; you know that I love you” (John 21:15, 16), and then, in exasperation during the third question, he tells Jesus, “Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you” (John 21:17).

After Peter responds, Jesus tells Peter “Feed my lambs” (John 21:15), “Tend my sheep” (John 21:16), and then “Feed my sheep” (John 21:17). Both “feed” and “tend” (or, *shepherd*), as well “lambs” and “sheep,” are examples of those synonyms that John regularly uses. Lambs are young sheep, so it is unlikely that Jesus means something different when he tells Peter to “Feed my *lambs*” (John 21:15)

compared to “Feed my *sheep*” (John 21:17). Furthermore, to *feed* is the main part of the whole work of *tending* (or, *shepherding*) sheep. Again, John is not using synonyms to say different things each time, but to give the same message from slightly different perspectives.

The word *feed*, then, can describe any aspect of church leadership or church government; however, the primary emphasis of *feeding* points to the chief duty of Christ’s shepherds: to feed God’s *word* to his people.²⁹ Shepherding is “one of the most frequent and characteristic images for leadership and care of the church...rooted in the portrayal of God as shepherd of his people (e.g., Pss. 23; 77:20; Ezekiel 34) and of Jesus as the good shepherd (10:1ff., 26ff.; Hb. 13:20; 1 Pt. 2:25, etc.).”³⁰ Jesus, the Good Shepherd, sends his disciples to serve as undershepherds, but not according to our own wisdom, insight, strength, and values. Instead, the shepherd’s work consists almost entirely of feeding Jesus’ word in the Scriptures to Jesus’ sheep so that they may hear the voice of their Good Shepherd (John 10:5, 27).³¹ These words apparently sunk in for Peter, since, roughly three decades later, he wrote similar words in 1 Peter 5:1–3.³²

Recall, then, how John connected the previous section to this section of Jesus’ conversation with Peter: “When they had finished breakfast...” (John 21:15). After Jesus feeds his disciples, he turns to instruct Peter to “Feed my lambs.” Craig Keener writes, “This involves not so much physical nourishment as the bread of life (6:26–27). It is, however, noteworthy that Jesus invites Peter to feed others only after Peter has himself first eaten (21:15); just as Peter had to accept Jesus’ washing before he could serve the Lord (13:8–10), he had to eat his meal.”³³ Peter began his work the previous night by seeking to provide food for himself. There was nothing wrong with that, but Jesus takes this opportunity to thwart Peter’s success in order to instruct him further. After a long, unproductive night, Jesus then provides Peter with both a huge catch of fish *and* a breakfast on the shore of the Sea of Tiberias. Only now that Peter has finished his breakfast is he ready to hear his commission to *feed Jesus’ sheep*.

Undoubtedly, the work of shepherding Jesus’ sheep is long, toiling work, often without the ability to see clearly the progress of the sheep. John Calvin suggests that Jesus may be asking whether Peter loves him three times not only in reference to Peter’s threefold denial, but also to build up Peter’s stamina for hardship in ministry: “Peter was not yet sufficiently aware how deeply the love of Christ must be engraven on the hearts of those who have to struggle against innumerable difficulties.”³⁴ Peter is grieved by this third question, and yet, as a pastor, he will be grieved many more times in the future by the faltering steps of his sheep—and even by his own faltering steps later on (cf. Gal. 2:11–14)! In many ways, then, the long night of fruitless fishing is a perfect illustration of ministry. We may go through a long period of darkness without seeing any fruit. Nevertheless, we know that at any moment Jesus may show up, instruct us by his word, and suddenly bring forth far more fruit from our ministry than we could have ever imagined. We must, therefore, prepare ourselves to endure the long night before Jesus reveals himself to us.

Greater Grief

Peter’s grief will extend beyond this painful conversation with Jesus, and beyond the difficulties of ministry as a pastor. Beyond those trials, Jesus tells Peter that he will eventually give up his life in service to Jesus:

[18] “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.” [19] (This he said to show by what kind of death he was to glorify God.) And after saying this he said to him, “Follow me.” (John 21:18–19)

Some commentators interpret Jesus’ prophecy here in general terms to refer to a martyr’s death without specifying the means by which Peter will die.³⁵ Nevertheless, the phrase “stretch out... hands” was a common reference to crucifixion, describing the way the victim was “tied to the horizontal crossbar...and compelled to carry his cross to the place of execution.”³⁶ Jesus solemnly (“Truly, truly, I say to you...”) tells Peter that he will suffer and die on a cross, just as Jesus did. Even Jesus dreaded the prospect of dying (John 12:27), but, just as Jesus prayed instead, “Father, glorify your name” (John 12:28), so Jesus encourages Peter that his death will glorify God (John 21:19).³⁷ According to early Christian tradition, Peter eventually did die by crucifixion, and probably upside-down.³⁸ Peter felt grief when Jesus asked him a third time whether Peter loved him (John 21:17). Now, Jesus calls Peter into a greater grief that Jesus himself tasted, saying, “Follow me” (John 21:19). Köstenberger writes, “The rest of Peter’s life must be lived in the shadow of the cross, just as Jesus’ was.”³⁹ Keener adds, “As a shepherd, Peter must face death (21:18–19), as his good shepherd had (10:11, 15, 17–18); as one of the sheep, Peter must ‘follow’ Jesus (21:19; 10:4–5, 27)—even to death (13:36–37).”⁴⁰

In this light, we see a bit more of how the earlier story of the breakfast by the sea informs Jesus’ message to Peter. To start, we have recognized that Jesus’ three questions to Peter reflect his threefold denial, but there are a few other elements that connect this scene back to Peter’s denial.⁴¹ During the Last Supper, Jesus had told Peter, “Where I am going you cannot follow me now, but you will follow afterward” (John 13:36), and now Jesus tells Peter to “Follow me” on the way to his *own* cross. Peter responded during the Last Supper, “Lord, why can I not follow you now? I will lay down my life for you” (John 13:37). While Peter was not able to follow Jesus to the cross *then*, Jesus now tells Peter that this is exactly what he must do. At the Last Supper, Jesus warned Peter of the impending denial with the solemn, “Truly, truly, I say to you...” formula (John 13:38), and now Jesus warns Peter of his eventual crucifixion in the same words. Finally, Peter made denials while warming himself around a charcoal fire in the court of the high priest (John 13:18, 25), and now Jesus reconciles himself to Peter around the charcoal fire on which he had prepared Peter’s breakfast (John 21:9). Throughout John 21, Jesus not only walks back through Peter’s failure on the night of his crucifixion, but Jesus also *redeems* every false step that Peter took. Out of our failure, Jesus calls us to feed his flock.

In all, we see that Peter gets what he wanted on the night leading up to Jesus’ betrayal and crucifixion; however, he was not prepared to follow Jesus then, and he does not necessarily “want” (John 21:18) this fate now that he knows better what it will entail for him. Nevertheless, this is the path of discipleship that we all must walk. Before taking up the yoke of Jesus’ discipleship (“when you were young...”) we could do as we pleased (“you used to dress yourself and walk wherever you wanted”). As we mature in following Jesus (“but when you are old”), we more willingly obey Jesus to go where he leads us, even through great pain (“you will stretch out your hands, and another will dress you and carry you where you do not want to go”). The hope of gaining Jesus, though, is worth whatever pain we experience on the way.

Out of our Frustration, Jesus Calls us to Focus on the Task (John 21:20–25)

At this point, Peter turns around to see his friend John following after them during their conversation:

[20] Peter turned and saw the disciple whom Jesus loved following them, the one who also had leaned back against him during the supper and had said, “Lord, who is it that is going to betray you?” [21] When Peter saw him, he said to Jesus, “Lord, what about this man?” [22] Jesus said to him, “If it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you? You follow me!” [23] So the saying spread abroad among the brothers that this disciple was not to die; yet Jesus did not say to him that he was not to die, but, “If it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you?” (John 21:20–23)

We do not know how much Peter understood of the grim prediction that Jesus made concerning him; however, it is clear that he must have understood something of its reality. So, when Peter turns around to see John, he asks Jesus what will happen to John, given all that Jesus has said will happen to him. Jesus dismisses Peter’s idle curiosity, knowing that worrying about John will only distract Peter from the call that Jesus has given to him.⁴² Each of us is given something different in life, but rather than comparing our call to other disciples, we must instead remember the words that Jesus speaks to Peter: “What is that to you? You follow me!” (John 21:22).

Primarily, Jesus’ rebuke to Peter is not about the eventual suffering and death of Peter on his cross. Rather, Jesus wants to remind Peter of the great task of shepherding the sheep that Jesus has just given to him. Jesus gives Peter no information on the eventual fate of John, nor on the timetable of his own death. Instead, Jesus refocuses Peter on the command that Jesus has given him: “Feed my sheep!” William Hendriksen writes, “*Peter must not be so deeply interested in God’s secret counsel (regarding John) that he fails to pay attention to God’s revealed will!* It is a lesson which every believer in every age should take to heart.”⁴³ Out of our frustration with our fruitlessness, our failure, or even our circumstances, Jesus calls us simply to focus on the task he has given to us.

The Witness of John

In fact, not everyone heeded the words of Jesus, so that speculation arose in the church about John’s fate:

[23] So the saying spread abroad among the brothers that this disciple was not to die; yet Jesus did not say to him that he was not to die, but, “If it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you?” [24] This is the disciple who is bearing witness about these things, and who has written these things, and we know that his testimony is true. (John 21:23–24)

John here clarifies that Jesus *never* predicted that he would not die. Instead, Jesus said this to tell Peter that John’s fate was none of his business. We should notice, though, that just as so many elements of this scene reminds us of *Peter’s* actions at the Last Supper and the night of Jesus’ betrayal, the description of John in John 21:20 also reminds us of the Last Supper: “the disciple whom Jesus

loved...the one who also had leaned back against him during the supper and had said, “Lord who is it that is going to betray you?” (John 21:20; cf. John 13:24–25).

So, while Peter gets what he sought that night—the martyr’s privilege of following Jesus into death—John also gets what he sought that night: intimacy with Jesus.⁴⁴ It is at this point that John reveals that he, the author, is the same disciple who “is bearing witness” (present tense) about these things, and who “has written” (past/aorist tense) them. That is, “This disciple, John, is the one who is still bearing witness orally; *and* he recently recorded these things.”⁴⁵ The “we” in “we know that his testimony is true” is an *editorial* “we” (cf. John 3:2, 11; 20:2), an expression that John uses when he speaks about his “testimony” (cf. 1 John 1:2, 4; 3 John 1:11).⁴⁶ John is given a longer life to proclaim Jesus, both in preaching and in the writing that he has done to record the life of Jesus in this Gospel. He does not die a martyr’s death, but he ends his life in exile on the island of Patmos “on account of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus” (Rev. 1:9). Even at the end of his life, John is privileged with the intimacy of beholding the resurrected Jesus one last time before his death in an experience recorded for us in the book of Revelation.

The Rest of Jesus’ Life

To close out this letter, John humbly acknowledges how little he has been able to capture of the entirety of Jesus’ life: “Now there are also many other things that Jesus did. Were every one of them to be written, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written” (John 21:25). Nevertheless, we should not forget that what John *has* written is enough to lead us to believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, that we might have life through faith in his name (John 20:31).⁴⁷ While we wish that we could know more about Jesus, there is a sense in which “Jesus is further praised by what the author must leave unsaid (cf. Heb 11:32).”⁴⁸

Like Peter, however, we must remember that those events are not revealed to us: “What is that to you?” Instead, we must devote ourselves to the testimony that Jesus *has* given us. By studying this Gospel, we must not only come to faith in Jesus, but we must also begin to see the path of discipleship laid out for us too. Rather than speculating about what we do not have, we must recognize that the path of glory through suffering was not for Jesus alone, but for us too—but that as we follow Jesus by faith, we will find life in his name. Until Jesus returns, let us be faithful fulfill the commission he has given us by both fishing for and shepherding his people through his word and his Spirit.

Discussion Questions

1. What are your day-to-day vocations? That is, how has God called you to serve your family, church, work, and/or neighborhood? Do you ever feel that you are not doing “enough” for the kingdom of God, given the constraints of these other vocations? What do we learn from the example of apostles who fish and make tents about what God expects from us?
2. Like the disciples fishing without success all night, where does your life feel most fruitless right now? Deep down, how much do you believe that your efforts should unfailingly produce results, as though your strength were in itself sufficient to the task? Do you find yourself taking God’s kindness for granted—at least, until he does not grant you the results that you want? How might you remind

yourself practically that everything comes to us by grace (cf. 1 Cor. 4:7)?

3. To what extent do you struggle with shame from past failures in your life? Have you dealt with those failures sufficiently, seeking appropriate forgiveness from God and from those you have hurt? Have you done all that you need to do in order to avoid failing in the same ways in the future, including ongoing dependence on God's grace through prayer? How does Jesus' conversation with Peter address your own doubts, fears, and concerns?

4. What does it mean to "feed" and to "tend/shepherd" Jesus' flock? What role does God's word play in the way that we feed others spiritually? How might you *feed* those under your care or in your spheres of influence? What might you do practically to avoid being distracted from that task by the pain, pressure, and temptations of life?

Notes

1. For the reasons listed in this paragraph, see Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to John*, vol. II, 473–75.

2. e.g., Lenski, *The Interpretation of John's Gospel*, 1399. Also, Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to John*, vol. II, 473–74.

3. For the reasons listed in the rest of this paragraph, see Köstenberger, *John*, 584–85.

4. Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 666.

5. Ridderbos, *The Gospel According to John*, 658.

6. Lenski, *The Interpretation of John's Gospel*, 1402.

7. The word does appear twice in the longer ending of Mark (Mark 16:12, 14), which most scholars judge to have been a later addition that Mark himself did not write. Beasley-Murray, *John*, 398.

8. *Ibid.*

9. Ridderbos, *The Gospel According to John*, 658–59.

10. Keener, *The Gospel of John*, vol. 2, 1227.

11. Beasley-Murray, *John*, 399.

12. Calvin, *Commentary on the Gospel According to John*, vol. II, 284. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom35.x.iv.html>>

13. Köstenberger, *John*, 590.

14. "Did the morning haze on the water render sight indistinct? Did Jesus will not to be recognized at once? Or was his appearance quite different from the previous appearances? All three explanations have been offered." (Lenski, *The Interpretation of John's Gospel*, 1405.)

15. Calvin, *Commentary on the Gospel According to John*, vol. II, 285–86. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom35.x.iv.html>>

16. Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to John*, vol. II, 479.

17. Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to John*, vol. II, 483.

18. Lenski, *The Interpretation of John's Gospel*, 1409–10.

19. Calvin, *Commentary on the Gospel According to John*, vol. II, 287. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom35.x.iv.html>>

20. Morris, *The Gospel According to John*, 764.

21. Lenski, *The Interpretation of John's Gospel*, 1415–16.

22. Lenski, *The Interpretation of John's Gospel*, 1417.

23. Calvin, *Commentary on the Gospel According to John*, vol. II, 287–88. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom35.xi.ii.html>>

24. Nevertheless, I am inclined to agree with George Beasley-Murray: “The question, ‘Do you love me *more than these?*’, in the context must surely mean, ‘...more than your fellow disciples do?’ (rather than, ‘more than you love them,’ or ‘more than you love your fishing equipment’). It is not that Jesus would distinguish the depth of Peter’s love from that of the others, but that Peter had brashly asserted his loyalty to Jesus as more steadfast than theirs (see Matt. 26:33, which has no real counterpart in John 13:36–37, but which in some form could well have been known in the Johannine circles). The question is whether he is prepared to make such a statement now.” (Beasley-Murray, *John*, 405.)

25. Lenski, *The Interpretation of John's Gospel*, 1419.

26. Morris, *The Gospel According to John*, 770.

27. “The fact that there are two different verbs for ‘love’ used in the present passage has led some to believe that ἀγαπάω (*agapaō*) and φιλέω (*phileō*) are distinct in meaning, but this is doubtful for at least two reasons: (1) the fact that the word ἀγαπάω, said to convey the notion of divine love, is used with reference to human love—and evil humans at that—in texts such as 3:19 and 12:43, and that φιλέω, said to connote human love, is used for God the Father in 5:20 (where he is said to love the Son) and 16:27 (where he is said to love the disciples); (2) the presence of other close synonyms in the same section, such as the use of two words for ‘know’ (γινώσκω, *ginōskō*; οἶδα, *oīda*), and stylistic variants of ‘tend/shepherd’ (βόσκω, *boskō*; ποιμαίνω, *poimainō*), ‘My sheep/lambs’ (ἀρνία, *arnia*; πρόβατα, *probata*) in 21:15–17 (Köstenberger 1999a: 193–94; Carson 1991: 676–77, citing Barr 1987: esp. 15).” (Köstenberger, *John*, 596.)

28. Lenski, *The Interpretation of John's Gospel*, 1418.

29. Calvin, *Commentary on the Gospel According to John*, vol. II, 289–90. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom35.xi.ii.html>>

30. Ridderbos, *The Gospel According to John*, 666.

31. Calvin, *Commentary on the Gospel According to John*, vol. II, 291. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom35.xi.ii.html>>

32. Köstenberger, *John*, 597.

33. Keener, *The Gospel of John*, vol. 2, 1234.

34. Calvin, *Commentary on the Gospel According to John*, vol. II, 291–92. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom35.xi.ii.html>>

35. e.g., Ridderbos, *The Gospel According to John*, 667.

36. Köstenberger, *John*, 598.

37. Calvin, *Commentary on the Gospel According to John*, vol. II, 294. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom35.xi.ii.html>>

38. Keener, *The Gospel of John*, vol. 2, 1237–38.

39. Köstenberger, *John*, 599.

40. Keener, *The Gospel of John*, vol. 2, 1237.

41. For this paragraph, see Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to John*, vol. II, 486.

42. Calvin, *Commentary on the Gospel According to John*, vol. II, 296. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom35.xi.iii.html>>

43. Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to John*, vol. II, 491.

44. “That the Evangelist specifically identifies the beloved disciple by referring back to 13:24–25 is not because this is the first time he appears in the epilogue (*cf.* v. 7, where he is not so identified) but for two other reasons. First, the reminder that this disciple leaned his head on Jesus’ breast at the last supper establishes his credentials as an intimate of the Lord Jesus—an especially significant theme in light of the beloved disciple’s

distinctive role (vv. 22, 24). The point is important, for this intimacy simultaneously establishes the credentials of the Fourth Gospel. It may not be too far-fetched to think of John leaning on Jesus' breast as a kind of lesser intimacy to that of the Son with the Father, in the bosom of the Father (1:18; *cf.* also notes on 15:9–11). Second, the episode at the last supper calls to mind that Peter signalled to John to get him to ask Jesus a question: *i.e.* it assumes a certain intimacy between the beloved disciple and Peter. That intimacy makes Peter's question more comprehensible, if not more justifiable. His own prognosis is not very good: for Peter the cost of discipleship will be high. What about *him*?" (Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 680–81.)

45. Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to John*, vol. II, 493.

46. Beasley-Murray, *John*, 413.

47. Calvin, *Commentary on the Gospel According to John*, vol. II, 299–300. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom35.xi.iii.html>>

48. Keener, *The Gospel of John*, vol. 2, 1242.