

John: sermon #25 (conclusion to series)

# Participating in Jesus' resurrection life

(John 21)

## Introduction

Though the 20<sup>th</sup> chapter of John reads like the book's conclusion, chapter 21 serves as an appendix with three purposes:

1. To tell how Peter was restored to Christ's service (explaining his prominence as the lead apostle).
2. To refute a prevalent rumor that John would live until Jesus returned.
3. To teach believers how to relate to their risen Lord. During the forty days between his resurrection and ascension, Jesus visited with his disciples and prepared them for the coming of the Spirit and their future ministries in his service (Acts 1:1–9). This chapter speaks powerfully concerning our own relationship with the risen Lord, including active participation in his disciple-making ministry. **The nature of that participation is clarified in this chapter using three pictures: each with something vital to say about who we are in Christ and how we are to respond.**

### 1. As fishers of men we obey Jesus (21:1–8)

*<sup>1</sup> Afterward Jesus appeared again to his disciples, by the Sea of Tiberias. It happened this way: <sup>2</sup> Simon Peter, Thomas (called Didymus), Nathanael from Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two other disciples were together. <sup>3</sup> "I'm going out to fish," Simon Peter told them, and they said, "We'll go with you." So they went out and got into the boat, but that night they caught nothing. <sup>4</sup> Early in the morning, Jesus stood on the shore, but the disciples did not realize that it was Jesus. <sup>5</sup> He called out to them, "Friends, haven't you any fish?" "No," they answered. <sup>6</sup> He said, "Throw your net on the right side of the boat and you will find some." When they did, they were unable to haul the net in because of the large number of fish. <sup>7</sup> Then the disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, "It is the Lord!" As soon as Simon Peter heard him say, "It is the Lord," he wrapped his outer garment around him (for he had taken it off) and jumped into*

*the water. <sup>8</sup> The other disciples followed in the boat, towing the net full of fish, for they were not far from shore, about a hundred yards.*

**The Lord had instructed his disciples to meet him in Galilee, which helps explain why they were at the Sea of Galilee, also called the Sea of Tiberias (Matt. 26:32; 28:7–10; Mark 16:7). But John did not explain why Peter decided to go fishing, and Bible students are not in agreement in their suggestions.** Some claim that he was perfectly within his rights, that he needed to pay his bills and the best way to get money was to go fishing. Why sit around idle? Get busy! Others believe Peter had been called *from* that kind of life (Luke 5:1–11) and that it was wrong for him to return. Furthermore, when he went fishing, Peter took six other men with him. If he was wrong, they were wrong too.

**It is interesting that at least seven of the twelve disciples were probably fishermen. Why did Jesus call so many fishermen to follow him? For one thing, fishermen are courageous, and Jesus needs brave people to follow him. They are also dedicated to one thing and cannot easily be distracted. Professional fishermen do not quit. Also they know how to take orders, and they know how to work together.**

Whether Peter and his friends were right or wrong we cannot prove—but we do know this: **their fishing efforts were in vain.** Had they forgotten the Lord’s words, “For without me, you can do nothing”? (John 15:5). **They toiled all night and caught nothing.** Certainly, Peter must have remembered what happened two years before, when Jesus called him into full-time discipleship (Luke 5:1–11). On that occasion, Peter had fished all night and caught nothing, but Jesus had turned his failure into success.

**Perhaps Peter’s impulsiveness and self-confidence were revealing themselves again. He was sincere, and he worked hard. The disciples sincerely believed that they were doing God’s will. They were serving without direction from the Lord.**

**After his resurrection, our Lord was sometimes not recognized (Luke 24:16; John 20:14); so it was that his disciples did not recognize him when, at dawn, he appeared on the shore. His**

**question expected a negative reply: “Friends, haven’t you any fish?”” Their reply was brief and perhaps a bit embarrassed: “No.”**

**It was time for Jesus to take over the situation**, just as he did when he called Peter into discipleship. **He told them where to cast the net; they obeyed, and they caught a large number of fish.** The difference between success and failure was the width of their boat. We are never far from success when we permit Jesus to give the orders, and we are usually closer to success than we realize.

**It was John who first realized that the stranger on the shore was their own Lord and Master.** It was John who leaned on the Lord’s breast at the table (John 13:23) and who stood by the cross when his Lord suffered and died (John 19:26). It is love that recognizes the Lord and shares that good news with others: “It is the Lord!”

**With characteristic impulsiveness, Peter quickly put on his outer garment and dove into the water. He wanted to get to Jesus, and quickly.** This is in contrast to Luke 5:8 where Peter told the Lord to depart from him. The other six men followed in the boat, bringing the net full of fish. In the experience recorded in Luke 5, the nets began to break; but in this experience, the net held fast.

Perhaps we can see in these two “fishing miracles” an illustration of how the Lord helps his people fish for men. All of our efforts are useless apart from his direction and blessing. During this present age, we do not know how many fish we have caught, and it often appears that the nets are breaking. But at the end of the age, when we see the Lord, not one fish will be lost and we will discover how many there are.

**Jesus called the disciples and us to be “fishers of men.” This phrase was not invented by Jesus; it had been used for years by Greek and Roman teachers. To be a “fisher of men” in that day meant to seek to persuade men and “catch” them with the truth.** A fisherman catches living fish, but when he gets them, they die. A Christian witness seeks to catch “dead fish” (dead in their sins), and when he or she “catches” them, they are made alive in Christ!

**We can understand why Jesus had so many fishermen in his group of followers. Fishermen know how to work. They have courage and faith to go out “into the deep.” They have much patience and persistence, and they will not quit. They know how to cooperate with one another, and they are skilled in using the equipment and the boat. What examples for us to follow as we seek to “catch fish” for Jesus Christ! We are indeed “fishers of men,” and there are “fish” all around us. If we obey his directions, we will catch the fish.**

## **2. As shepherds of God’s flock we love Jesus (21:9–17)**

*9 When they landed, they saw a fire of burning coals there with fish on it, and some bread. 10 Jesus said to them, "Bring some of the fish you have just caught." 11 Simon Peter climbed aboard and dragged the net ashore. It was full of large fish, 153, but even with so many the net was not torn.*

*12 Jesus said to them, "Come and have breakfast." None of the disciples dared ask him, "Who are you?" They knew it was the Lord. 13 Jesus came, took the bread and gave it to them, and did the same with the fish. 14 This was now the third time Jesus appeared to his disciples after he was raised from the dead.*

*15 When they had finished eating, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon son of John, do you truly love me more than these?" "Yes, Lord," he said, "you know that I love you." Jesus said, "**Feed my lambs.**" 16 Again Jesus said, "Simon son of John, do you truly love me?" He answered, "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you." Jesus said, "**Take care of my sheep.**" 17 The third time he said to him, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" Peter was hurt because Jesus asked him the third time, "Do you love me?" He said, "Lord, you know all things; you know that I love you." Jesus said, "**Feed my sheep.**"*

**Jesus met his disciples on the beach where he had already prepared breakfast for them. This entire scene must have stirred Peter’s memory and touched his conscience.** Surely he was recalling that first catch of fish (Luke 5:1–11) and perhaps even the feeding of the 5,000 with bread and fish (John 6). It was at the close of the latter event that Peter had given his clear-cut witness of faith in Jesus Christ (John

6:66–71). The “fire of coals” would certainly remind him of the fire at which he denied the Lord (John 18:18).

Three “invitations” stand out in John’s Gospel: “Come and see” (John 1:39); “Come and drink” (John 7:37); and “Come and dine” (John 21:12). How loving of Jesus to feed Peter before he dealt with his spiritual needs. He gave Peter opportunity to dry off, get warm, satisfy his hunger, and enjoy personal fellowship. Certainly the spiritual is more important than the physical. Our Lord does not so emphasize the needs of the soul that he neglects the needs of the body. He ministers to the whole person.

Peter and his Lord had already met privately (Luke 24:34; 1 Cor. 15:5), but since Peter had denied the Lord *publicly*, it was important that there be public restoration. And since Peter had denied his Lord three times, Jesus asked him three personal questions. He also encouraged him by giving a threefold commission that restored Peter to his ministry.

What did the Lord mean when he said to Peter “do you love me more than these”? Was he asking, “Do you love me more than these other men love me?” Not likely, because this had never been a problem among the disciples. They all loved the Lord Jesus supremely, even though they did not always obey him completely. Perhaps Jesus meant, “Do you love me more than you love these boats and nets and fish?” This is likely what he meant. Peter had boasted of his love for Christ and had even contrasted it with that of the other men, when he had earlier said to Jesus, “I will lay down my life for you!” (John 13:37) “Even if all fall away on account of you, I never will” (Matt. 26:33). At this point and after denying his Lord and best friend three times, Peter is more sure of himself as a fisherman than as an Apostle. Peter probably felt that the three denials would mean a rejection by Jesus. But Jesus’ promises to Peter as the lead Apostle was soon to be established in a beautiful affirmation of love for Peter.

Many commentaries point out that, in this conversation, two different words are used for “love.” In his questions in John 21:15–16, our Lord used *agape*, which is the Greek word for the

highest kind of love, it is self-sacrificing love, divine love. In answer to the Lord's questions, Peter will only answer by using the word *phileo*, which is the love of friend for friend, fondness for another. In John 21:17, Jesus and Peter both used the word *phileo*. Why did Jesus go from *agape* to *phileo*? After gently encouraging Peter to come up to the level of *agape*, Jesus says in effect, "OK Peter, your afraid to boldly declare *agape* love for me, so I'll meet you where your at, in your fear and reluctance to be bold. I understand your fear of a bold declaration and your fear of failing again. So, I'll meet you in your *phileo*. I'll meet you where your at, in your fear, in your doubts, I'll meet you where your at. I'll meet you in *phileo*, even though my love is *agape*, because I want to assure you that we are still on this journey together."

In spite of his faults and failures, Peter did indeed love the Lord, and he was not ashamed to admit it. The other men were certainly listening "over Peter's shoulder" and benefiting from the conversation, for they too had failed the Lord after boasting of their devotion. Peter had already wept bitterly over his denial. Now he was being restored to apostleship and leadership.

Jesus gave three admonitions to Peter: "Feed my lambs," "Take care of my sheep," and "Feed my sheep." Both the lambs and the more mature sheep need feeding and leading, and that is the task of the spiritual shepherd. It is an awesome responsibility to be a shepherd of God's flock (1 Peter 5:2). **There are enemies that want to destroy the flock, and the shepherd must be alert and courageous** (Acts 20:28–35). By nature, sheep are defenseless and need the protection and guidance of the shepherd.

**While it is true that the Holy Spirit equips people to serve as shepherds, and gives these people to churches** (Eph. 4:11ff), it is also true that each individual Christian must help to care for the flock. **Each of us has a gift or gifts from the Lord, and we should use what he has given us to help protect and perfect the flock.** Sheep are prone to wander, and **we must look after each other and encourage each other.**

Jesus Christ is the Good Shepherd (John 10:11), the Great Shepherd (Heb. 13:20–21), and the Chief Shepherd (1 Peter 5:4). Pastors are “under-shepherds” who must obey him as they minister to the flock. *The most important thing the pastor can do is to love Jesus Christ.* If he truly loves Jesus Christ, the pastor will also love his sheep and tenderly care for them. **The Greek word for “sheep” at the end of John 21:17 means “dear sheep.” Our Lord’s sheep are dear to him and he wants all of us to love each other and care for each other personally and lovingly as brothers and sisters in Christ. Members who love the flock will serve it faithfully. As the lead pastor and minister, Peter took his commission to shepherd the flock very seriously as reflected in what he wrote in 1 Peter 5:1-4.**

### **3. As disciples we walk with Jesus (21:18–25)**

*<sup>18</sup> “I tell you the truth, when you were younger you dressed yourself and went where you wanted; but when you are old you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go.” <sup>19</sup> Jesus said this to indicate the kind of death by which Peter would glorify God. Then he said to him, “Follow me!”*

*<sup>20</sup> Peter turned and saw that the disciple whom Jesus loved was following them. (This was the one who had leaned back against Jesus at the supper and had said, “Lord, who is going to betray you?”) <sup>21</sup> When Peter saw him, he asked, “Lord, what about him?” <sup>22</sup> Jesus answered, “If I want him to remain alive until I return, what is that to you? You must follow me.” <sup>23</sup> Because of this, the rumor spread among the brothers that this disciple would not die. But Jesus did not say that he would not die; he only said, “If I want him to remain alive until I return, what is that to you?”*

*<sup>24</sup> This is the disciple who testifies to these things and who wrote them down. We know that his testimony is true. <sup>25</sup> Jesus did many other things as well. If every one of them were written down, I suppose that even the whole world would not have room for the books that would be written.*

**Jesus had just spoken about Peter's life and ministry, and now he talks about Peter's death. This must have been a shock to Peter, to have the Lord discuss his death in such an open manner. No doubt Peter was rejoicing that he had been restored to fellowship and apostleship. Why bring up martyrdom?**

**The first time Jesus spoke about his own death, Peter had opposed it (Matt. 16:21ff). Peter had even used his sword in the Garden in a futile attempt to protect his Lord. Yet Peter had boasted he would die for Jesus. Now Jesus is asking Peter to do just that. Why? Because when a person has settled the matter of death, then he is ready to live and to serve.** Our Lord's own death is a repeated theme in John's Gospel: he knew that his "hour" would come, and he was prepared to obey the Father's will. We as his followers must yield ourselves—just as he yielded himself for us—and be "living sacrifices" (Rom. 12:1–2) who are "ready to be offered" (2 Tim. 4:6–8) if it is the will of God.

Earlier that morning, Peter had hurried to shore to meet Jesus (John 21:7). The day would come when another would take charge of Peter—and kill him (see 2 Peter 1:13–14). Tradition tells us that Peter was crucified—because he felt himself unworthy to die exactly as his Master had died, he requested to be crucified upside down. However, Peter's eventual death would not be a tragedy; it would glorify God! The death of Lazarus glorified God (John 11:4, 40) and so did the death of Jesus (John 12:23ff). Paul's great concern was that he glorify God, whether by life or by death (Phil. 1:20–21). This should be our desire as well.

**Our Lord's words, "Follow me" (verse 19), must have brought new joy and love to Peter's heart. Literally, Jesus said, "Keep on following me." Immediately, Peter began to follow Jesus, just as he had done before his great denial.** However, for a moment *Peter took his eyes off the Lord Jesus*, a mistake he had made at least two other times. After that first great catch of fish, Peter took his eyes off his Lord and looked at *himself*. "Depart from me; for I am a sinful man, Lord!" (Luke 5:8) When he was walking on the stormy sea with Jesus, Peter looked away from the Lord and began to look at the wind and waves; and immediately he began to sink (Matt. 14:30). It is dangerous to look at the circumstances instead of looking to the Lord. Why did Peter look away from his Lord and start to look back? He heard somebody walking behind him. It was the

**Apostle John who was also following Jesus. Peter did a foolish thing and asked Jesus, “Lord, what about him?” In other words, “Lord, you just told me what will happen to me; now, what will happen to John?”**

**The Lord rebuked Peter and reminded him that his job was to follow, not to meddle into the lives of other believers. This does not mean that we ignore others, because we do have the responsibility of caring for one another (Phil. 2:1–4). Rather, it means that we must not permit our curiosity about others to distract us from following the Lord. God has his plan for us; he also has plans for our Christian friends and associates. How he works in their lives is his business. Our business is to follow him as He leads us (see Rom. 14:1–13).**

**Jesus did not say that John would live until his return, but that is the way some misguided believers understood it. However, there is a somewhat enigmatic quality to what the Lord said about John. Jesus did not say that John would live until he returned, nor did he say that John would die before he returned. As it was, John lived the longest of all the disciples and did witness the Lord’s return when he saw the visions that he recorded in the Book of Revelation.**

## **Conclusion**

**As John closed his Gospel, he affirmed again the credibility of his testimony (*testimony/testify* is a key theme for John—the related words are used some forty-seven times.) John witnessed these events himself and wrote them for us as he was led by the Holy Spirit. He could have included much more, but he wrote only what the Spirit told him to write.**

**The book ends with Peter and John together following Jesus—beginning transformed lives of active participation in Christ Jesus in his continuing ministry on earth. Today, Jesus continues to transform the lives of those who obey, love and follow him as his disciples. Wherever he finds a believer who is willing to yield to his will, listen to his Word, and follow his way, he begins to transform that believer and accomplish remarkable things in that believers life. He also begins to do wonderful**

**things *through* that believers life. What a privilege! We succeed as we die to ourselves and trust Jesus to transform us, participating in his will and his continuing work and ministry on earth.**

***Sermon Series*** is provided by Ted Johnston via the Senior Pastor Team of Tom and Alberta Ecker to assist ... Bible studies in series covering a book of the Bible.

**This issue continues a series in the gospel of John** with material from *The Bible Expository Commentary* by Warren Wiersbe, *The New Bible Commentary*, *The Parable of Joy* by Michael Card, and *The Gospel of John* by F.F. Bruce.

**Note: Bold script above covered in Worship Services.**