



got life?

The Gospel of John A Bible Study with Stan Key

P.S. FOLLOW ME!

John 21:1–25

I. Why this chapter?

- A. Everyone agrees that chapter 20 is a **natural ending** for John's Gospel. Jesus has completed the work the Father sent him to do (giving his life as an offering for sin and rising from the dead) and he has commissioned his disciples to carry on the mission he began (Jn 20:19–23). John 20:30–31 provides a strong conclusion and application.
- B. So why chapter 21? Liberal textual **critics** often claim it was written by another author years after John's death to clear up some problems caused by the apostle's demise. They claim it is anticlimactic and perhaps reflects another version of the miracle recorded in Luke 5:1–11. Some see a political agenda in the early church where the "Peter party" and the "John party" were struggling against each other for supremacy.
- C. Yet every known manuscript of John's Gospel includes chapter 21 and there is no reason to believe it is not the work of the same author who penned the first 20 chapters. But why? Why did John add this postscript (appendix, epilogue, final comment)? This is a very **good question** and answering it will help us **interpret** its meaning.
- D. I believe John added this chapter for several reasons. Primarily, he wants to help disciples everywhere (like us) to discover realistic and practical ways to **apply the gospel** we say we believe. Chapter 21 helps us to understand that:
 1. Believing the gospel and even receiving the Holy Spirit (Chapter 20) does not **automatically** make us missionaries and world changers. Chapter 21 tells us that after the first disciples received their commission, rather than going out to change the world, they went **fishing!**
 2. There are at least three areas where the disciples (like us!) tend to struggle in applying the gospel to our personal lives:
 - a. **Discouragement** in believing that our lives really can make a difference. The problems "out there" are just too big and my life is just too small and insignificant. Me? Make a difference? I think I'll just go fishing.
 - b. Misplaced **priorities**. Even when I do give my all to be a mission-minded disciple and work to change my world, I often major on minors and emphasize that which is secondary. How can I be sure I'm doing the right thing?
 - c. **Comparison** with others. When I look at other disciples around me, they often seem to have it all together and to be leading dynamic ministries. Why does God seem to bless them more than me?
 3. Though John 21 applies to all disciples, it is especially appropriate for men and women **in ministry**. John concludes his Gospel by giving a word of encouragement to those who are called to fish for men and care for sheep.

II. Brief Commentary on John 21. There are three sections.

A. Jesus appears to seven disciples who have gone fishing (Jn 21:1–14).

1. The miracle catch of fish is the final **sign** in John’s Gospel (see Jn 20:30–31). A sign points beyond itself. Don’t just look *at* it, look **through** it. This sign points to what ministry is going to look like for the disciples.
2. What did Peter mean when he said, “I’m going fishing” (Jn 21:3). Was he returning to his old profession? Was he bored and restless? Was he frustrated and depressed and so went back to his “sweet spot”? Whatever his motivation, he was *not* fulfilling the commission he had been given by Jesus! While this may not have been sinful, it did reflect **confusion** about what to do next.
3. “That night they caught nothing” (Jn 21:3). Few things are more frustrating than failing at doing what you do best! In the Upper Room, Jesus had told the disciples, “Apart from me you **can do nothing**” (Jn 15:5). Peter was discovering that going back to what he was before was impossible! Without even realizing it, he had “crossed the Rubicon”; **no turning back!** (See Paul’s similar discovery in Phil 3:13–15).
4. A stranger on the shore offers advice to professional fisherman. “Cast the net on the right side of the boat” (Jn 21:6). When the men obey, they experience a **miraculous catch** of 153 large fish (Jn 21:11).¹ The fishermen were astounded that though the catch was so great the net “was not torn” (*schizo*, the root of our English word schism).
5. John is the first **to recognize** Jesus (“It is the Lord,” verse 7), but Peter is the first **to act** (“he threw himself into the sea,” verse 7). This is consistent with both of their personalities (see Jn 20:3–9).
6. Why did Peter “put on his outer garment” before swimming to shore (Jn 21:7)? The text probably describes some sort of **tucking** his robe into his waist band before jumping in the water. This would have made swimming possible and given him something to wear in the presence of Jesus.²
7. Jesus had prepared “a charcoal fire” (Jn 21:9). The choice of words can’t be accidental. This was the word used in John 18:18 of the fire where people were warming themselves when Peter denied Jesus three times. The sight of the fire must have been a **humbling reminder** to Peter of his greatest failure.

B. Peter is reinstated as the chief shepherd (Jn 21:15–19).

1. “Do you love me more than these?” (Jn 21:15). There are three possible meanings:
 - a. Do you love me *more than these other disciples love me?* (Is your level of spirituality really greater than theirs?)
 - b. Do you love me *more than you love your friends?* (Is your goal to please me above all else or are you still a people pleaser?)

¹ Though many have wanted to find a spiritual or symbolic value in the number 153, the probable meaning is simply this: fisherman have always loved to count their fish!

² An intriguing, though improbable, interpretation is that Peter believed he should be able to walk on water if indeed it was the risen Jesus on the beach. Now, perhaps he could succeed where he had failed in his earlier effort (see Mt 14:28–30). In putting on his outer garment, he was just getting dressed to take a walk!

- c. Do you love me *more than this fishing equipment* (boat, tackle, fish, etc.)? (Does your love for me take priority over your professional career and security?)

My preference is for the first option because of Peter's longstanding struggle with a **competitive spirit**, always comparing his spirituality to others' in an ongoing game of spiritual one-up-manship. He had boasted that he was stronger and better at following Jesus than anyone else (see Mt 26:33 and Lk 22:24). So now, Jesus exposes the ugly reality of what a pompous, self-serving coward he really is. Yet in the same moment Jesus reinstates him a Chief Under-Shepherd.

2. Notice that Jesus calls Peter "**Simon**" rather than the name he had given him ("Peter" or "Rock"—see Jn 1:42). In reminding him of his past, Jesus was at the same time liberating him from it!
3. The fact that Jesus asked Peter **three times** about his love is surely a veiled allusion to the fact that Peter had denied Jesus three times. The three-fold failure is matched by a three-fold **recommissioning!** "If Peter has a primacy among the apostles, it is because he has primacy as a forgiven sinner."³
4. Much has been made of the fact that John uses two different terms for love in this dialogue with Peter. In the first two questions, Jesus asks if Peter loves (*agapao*) him and Peter responds that he loves (*phileo*) him. In the third question, Jesus uses Peter's word (*phileo*) and Peter responds as he had the first two times. Those who insist that the words have different meanings believe that Jesus has somehow **lowered** his requirement for love to match what Peter was able to offer.

I once took a similar approach, but now I believe the two words, at least as they are used here, are basically **synonyms** and John uses them out of his love for stylistic variation (he also uses "sheep/lambs," "feed/tend," "Simon/Peter" and has different words for "fish."). Elsewhere, he uses *agapao* and *phileo* interchangeably. Jesus' three questions, therefore, are examining the **reality** of Peter's love, not its **quality!** As Jesus anticipates leaving the church in the hands of Peter and other human leaders, he does not raise questions concerning their training or gifting. The one thing he wants to determine is the reality of their love and their willingness to do anything for the well-being of the sheep.

5. In telling Peter that when he is old he will stretch out his hands and be carried to a place "you do not want to go" (Jn 21:18–19), Jesus is prophesying Peter's future **martyrdom**. According to tradition, he was crucified upside down.
- C. A question about John (Jn 21:20–23).
1. In learning of his coming martyrdom, Peter looks around for someone to **compare** himself with. Seeing John, he says to Jesus, "Lord, what about this man?" (Jn 21:21). Rather than focusing on his own call to "follow Jesus" (Jn 21:19, 22), Peter is once again in some sort of **competition** with those around him. Jesus' response is a stinging rebuke. In saying "What is that to you?" (Jn 21:22), Jesus is telling Peter to **mind his own business!**

³ Lesslie Newbigin, *The Light Has Come: An Exposition of the Fourth Gospel* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 279.

2. Apparently, this conversation had caused some in the early church to draw the conclusion that Jesus would return in glory **before** John's death. Thus, John's death could cause a crisis of faith. However, this is *not* what Jesus had said!

III. Three parting essentials.

A. The big *promise* (Jn 21:1–14)—your life will **make a difference!**

The world is big and the opposition is fierce and we who follow Christ are just a humble few with minimal resources, yet our lives can have a huge impact on the world and on human history—if we **follow Jesus** and **do what he says** (“Cast the net on the right side of the boat”). When we do, the results are beyond our wildest dreams!

Application #1—As I follow Jesus and do what he says, **my life matters!**

B. The essential *priority* (Jn 21:15–19)—**love Jesus** and **care for his sheep!**

1. Especially for those in full-time ministry, it is easy to get so caught up in the multitude of tasks and demands that we lose sight of the **main thing**. Jesus called Peter back to a two-fold essential priority:
 - a. *Love Jesus*. This is the great commandment! When we love Jesus, we will automatically do what he wants (see Jn 14:15). Illustration: Tevia in *Fiddler on the Roof*.
 - b. *Care for and feed his sheep*. Those in ministry need frequent reminders that the flock they pastor does not belong to them (or the bishop!) but to Jesus. One day, they will **give an account** to the Chief Shepherd for how they have cared for his flock. Peter's later life attests that he responded well to Jesus' thrice-repeated command (see 1 Pet 5:1–4).

Application #2—Are Jesus' priorities my priorities?

2. It is interesting how Jesus mixes his metaphors: first he calls his apostles to be **fishers of men** and then he calls them to be **shepherds**. The message seems to be that churches and ministers must have two roles. We must not **separate** what God has joined together!
 - Seeking the lost, **evangelism**—Fishers of men.
 - Caring for the found, **pastoral care**—Shepherds.

Application #3—In ministry, do I gravitate more toward “fishing” (evangelism) or “shepherding” (pastoral care)? What needs to happen so that I can be involved in *both* kinds of ministry?

C. The great *clarification* (Jn 21:20–23)—**follow Jesus!**

Is asking about John's role in God's plan, Peter was asking an **inappropriate** question! Peter had one job description: follow Jesus! God's plan for John was irrelevant to Peter. “You follow me!”⁴ (Jn 21:19, 22).

In C. S. Lewis' book *The Horse and His Boy* (*Chronicles of Narnia* series, Book 3), Shasta asks Aslan questions relating to a friend of his named Aravis. “Child, I am telling you your story, not hers. I tell no one any story but his own” (New York: Harper, 1954: 165).

⁴ The command “follow me” is in the Greek present tense which means “keep on following me.” Being a disciple of Jesus is something that concerns all of life, every day. It is not a decision one makes and then moves on to other things.

Application #4—Am I fixated on someone else's story to the degree that I am hindered from following my own?

SMALL GROUP DISCUSSION

1. Share with your group one thing that really spoke to you tonight and explain why.
 2. This study talked about three areas where disciples like us tend to struggle. Which of these three areas applies most to you?
 - discouragement (my life isn't making a difference)
 - misplaced priorities (loving Jesus and feeding sheep gets lost in the other demands of life and ministry)
 - comparison with others (why are others more blessed than I am?)
- Has tonight's study helped you to know how to deal better with this? How?
3. Pray for one another.

Jesus, Thy Wandering Sheep Behold!

By Charles Wesley

(sung to the tune of Sweet Hour of Prayer)

*Jesus, thy wandering sheep behold!
See, Lord, with tenderest pity see
The sheep that cannot find the fold,
Till sought and gathered in by thee.
Lost are they now, and scattered wide,
In pain, and weariness, and want;
With no kind shepherd near to guide
The sick, and spiritless, and faint.*

*Thou, only thou, the kind and good
And sheep-redeeming Shepherd art:
Collect thy flock, and give them food,
And pastors after thine own heart.
Give the pure word of general grace,
And great shall be the preachers' crowd;
Preachers, who all the sinful race
Point to the all-atoning blood.*

*Open their mouth, and utterance give;
Give them a trumpet voice, to call
On all the world to turn and live,
Through faith in him who died for all.
Thy only glory let them seek;
O let their hearts with love o'erflow!
Let them believe, and therefore speak,
And spread thy mercy's praise below.*