

John 21 • In the Mean Time

Introduction

Where Scripture is concerned there are no coincidences. Even the mention of the smallest detail is teaching something of greater, spiritual significance. I don't think it's by chance that the Holy Spirit inspired John to make this story the very last one presented in the Gospels.

There are a myriad of studies which show the different meanings of the word translated "love" in the exchange between Jesus and Peter, so we won't visit a topic for which you can find many fine and exhaustive studies to explain. There is a greater context which we should pay attention to here: **WHY** is this the last story documented? **WHY** did the Gospel of John end with this event rather than Christ's ascension into heaven? Most likely it's a greater teaching about how we're to conduct ourselves **BETWEEN** His ascension and imminent return.

¹After these things Jesus manifested Himself again to the disciples at the Sea of Tiberias, and He manifested Himself in this way. ²Simon Peter, and Thomas called Didymus, and Nathanael of Cana in Galilee, and the sons of Zebedee, and two others of His disciples were together. ³Simon Peter said to them, "I am going fishing."

They said to him, "We will also come with you." They went out and got into the boat; and that night they caught nothing.

[Read v.1-3]

Q: To first place this chapter in the proper context, is this the very last thing chronologically that happened before Christ's ascension into heaven?

A: No. The previous chapter closes out with the statement, "Therefore many other signs Jesus also performed in the presence of the disciples" (Jn. 20:30); this chapter is one of the examples of those occurrences.

This is most likely something that happened earlier on during the 40 days between Jesus' resurrection and ascension.

Q: What is going on with Peter? How does this speak to something greater spiritually about his life?

A: It was at this place, employed in this profession, that Peter had forsaken everything to follow Christ. (Lk. 5:1-11) It speaks of someone turning back to the old life.

Q: Read back through these verses and identify all the things which speak of different aspects of defeat.

1. It is dark/it takes place at night. It's the spiritual equivalent of not walking in the light.
2. They were operating with no direct word from the Lord. They're acting upon their own desires and feelings.
3. Their efforts meet with failure. In spite of being the most qualified persons from a worldly point of view – professional fishermen – they cannot succeed on their own merit or expertise.
4. They do not recognize Christ when He finally appears. In other words, their spiritual vision was dim.
5. Others?

Application: Peter's hasty decision represents a bad, spiritual influence which actually leads the other six men astray. We need to keep in mind that God blesses only those who abide in Christ and obey the Word.

"I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in Me and I in him, he bears much fruit, for apart from Me you can do nothing.

John 15:5

Application: Christians sometimes enter into well-meaning but unscriptural activities only to result in the loss of time, money, and energy for nothing. It is better to wait on the Lord for direction and allow **Him** to bless than to pursue useless activities on our own.

⁴But when the day was now breaking, Jesus stood on the beach; yet the disciples did not know that it was Jesus. ⁵So Jesus said to them, “Children, you do not have any fish, do you?”

They answered Him, “No.”

⁶And He said to them, “Cast the net on the right-hand side of the boat and you will find a catch.” So they cast, and then they were not able to haul it in because of the great number of fish.

⁷Therefore that disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, “It is the Lord.”

So when Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he put his outer garment on (for he was stripped for work), and threw himself into the sea. ⁸But the other disciples came in the little boat, for they were not far from the land, but about one hundred yards away, dragging the net full of fish.

⁹So when they got out on the land, they saw a charcoal fire already laid and fish placed on it, and bread. ¹⁰Jesus said to them, “Bring some of the fish which you have now caught.” ¹¹Simon Peter went up and drew the net to land, full of large fish, a hundred and fifty-three; and although there were so many, the net was not torn.

¹²Jesus said to them, “Come and have breakfast.” None of the disciples ventured to question Him, “Who are You?” knowing that it was the Lord. ¹³Jesus came and took the bread and gave it to them, and the fish likewise.

¹⁴This is now the third time that Jesus was manifested to the disciples, after He was raised from the dead.

¹⁵So 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, “Tend My lambs.”

¹⁶He said to him again 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, “Shepherd My sheep.”

¹⁷He 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 all things; You know that I love You.”

Jesus said to him, “Tend My sheep.”

[Read v.4-17]

Q: When does the light, both literal and spiritual, begin to appear?

A: When Christ appears on the scene.

Point: A few minutes' labor with Christ in control accomplishes more than a whole night of human efforts from the flesh.

Q: How does this miracle compare with the one at the beginning of Peter's calling in Luke 5?

<u>Luke 5</u>	<u>John 21</u>
It follows a night of failure.	It follows a night of failure.
No exact number of fish recorded.	153 fish caught.
The nets begin to break.	The net does not break.
Christ instructs from the boat.	Christ instructs from the shore.

Q: How is this overall scene a greater picture of the church today?

A: In Scripture boats are always a metaphor for the church, the sea a metaphor for the nations of the world, and fish a metaphor for souls saved out of the world.

Application: To be effective, the church needs to conduct the work of evangelism under the direction of Christ, going when and where He says, doing exactly what He commands. It's not effective just to undertake these activities according to our own feelings and desires but always according to His. Have you noticed this pattern of obedience in nearly every story by a missionary of their calling to a specific place, people, or time?

Q: How might this also be teaching us something about the church at the end of the age when Christ returns?

1. As we cast out the Gospel net it often breaks and there appears to be failure as we don't know how many souls are really won. But when Christ returns the exact number will be known and not a single one will be lost.
2. Today there are many boats and fishermen at work but when Christ returns we will see one church and all the redeemed in one Gospel net.
3. Others?

Q: How many miracles are actually spoken of here?

1. The miracle of the catch of fish when there had been none.
2. Peter is given miraculous strength to draw up a net which seven men were not able to draw up together. (v.6 & 11)
3. The fact that the net did not break.
4. The fire and the cooked breakfast were certainly supplied miraculously.

Point: Everything changes when all efforts are subordinated to Christ rather than to man's own desires and feelings.

Q: How did all these things combine to specifically open Peter's eyes and conscience?

1. The catch of fish reminded him of his past decision to forsake all and follow Christ.
2. The fire of coals reminded him of his past denial of Christ.
3. The location – the Sea of Galilee – reminded Peter of many past experiences of Christ's ministry such as the feeding of the 5,000, walking on the water, catching the fish with the coin, the calming of the storm, and so forth.

Q: But what did Jesus do first before He dealt directly with the issue of Peter's sin?

A: Christ first fed him. It's what Christ will require Peter to do with others as a shepherd to the church.

Q: If Peter is the greater representation of the restoration of a backslidden sinner, what is important about the way Jesus dealt with Peter?

A: The issue is actually a question of one's love for Christ.

Application: *If we really love Christ our lives will be both devoted and dedicated to His Word and ways alone.*

Q: What is Peter's new commission?

A: The word for "shepherd" is the same word for "pastor". He is no longer just a fisher of men as when originally called, but elevated to the special ministry of shepherding the flock. He's to shepherd the lambs and sheep and feed them the Word of God.

Application: *The Great Commission (Mt. 28:18-20) does not stop at making converts (i.e., being a "fisher of men"), but commands that we make disciples (i.e., "shepherd the flock"). What good is it to win the lost if there is no church where they might be fed and cared for?*

[Read v.18-25]

¹⁸Truly, truly, I say to you, when you were younger, you used to gird yourself and walk wherever you wished; but when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands and someone else will gird you, and bring you where you do not wish to go." ¹⁹Now this He said, signifying by what kind of death he would glorify God. And when He had spoken this, He said to him, "Follow Me!"

²⁰Peter, turning around, saw the disciple whom Jesus loved following them; the one who also had leaned back on His bosom at the supper and said, "Lord, who is the one who betrays You?" ²¹So Peter seeing him said to Jesus, "Lord, and what about this man?"

²²Jesus said to him, "If I want him to remain until I come, what is that to you? You follow Me!" ²³Therefore this saying went out among the brethren that that disciple would not die; yet Jesus did not say to him that he would not die, but only, "If I want him to remain until I come, what is that to you?"

²⁴This is the disciple who is testifying to these things and wrote these things, and we know that his testimony is true. ²⁵And there are also many other things which Jesus did, which if they were written in detail, I suppose that even the world itself would not contain the books that would be written.

Q: Why do you suppose that Jesus repeats His call to Peter, "Follow Me"?

A: There is a difference between sonship (being saved) and discipleship (following the Lord). The fact is that not every Christian is a disciple. When Peter sinned he did not lose his sonship, but he did fall away from his discipleship. For this reason Christ repeats His call.

Application: *It's not enough for the backslidden to simply acknowledge the issue of sin; recommitment to living a changed life exclusively according to His Word and ways is required. Yes, they must see and acknowledge sin, but they must follow up with forsaking all others for Christ alone.*

Q: What is Jesus referring to in v.18-19?

A: We know from the fact that Peter was ultimately crucified on a cross that Jesus is confronting Peter with the issue of the cross.

Q: Why is this particularly powerful where Peter is concerned?

A: First, it indicates that one day he, too, would be crucified. But secondly you may recall that it was Peter who at one time tried to keep Christ from the cross. (Mt. 16:21-28)

Application: *Everyone has to resolve, once and for all, the issue of the cross in their life, both in the Person and work of Christ, and in the requirement to "take up your cross and follow Me".*

Q: What is the mistake Peter is in danger of making in this passage?

A: The mistake of taking his eyes off the Lord and instead looking at others, in this case John.

[Continued on the next page.]

Application: *If we're to follow Christ we must keep our eyes fixed on Him alone, and to follow and obey Him exclusively. It's called "personal faithfulness". It's none of our business how Christ leads His other workers; our business is limited to our own personal faithfulness to His calling for our life.*

Therefore, since we have so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us, let us also lay aside every encumbrance and the sin which so easily entangles us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.

Hebrews 12: 1-2

Q: How does all of this relate to Peter's reappearance in Scripture in Acts 1?

A: If Peter had not met Christ here, had not confessed his sin, and not reaffirmed his love and rededicated his life, we would never have read about him again. But God was able to use Peter later (and mightily) because Peter made things right again with the Lord.

Application: *Christ uses and blesses those who obey and follow Him. Everything in one's past can be forgiven and restored to being fruitful for the kingdom*

Epilogue

In the first section, v.1-3, we have a picture of what can be called "a night of defeat". It is followed in v.4-17 by what can be called "a morning of decision" and, ultimately in v.18-25, "a day of dedication". Ultimately this final lesson in the Gospel of John is in reality the very most important lesson of what we're to do until Christ's return. If we truly grasped the importance of this teaching, we would conduct far fewer seminars on biblical prophecy and more fervently press for the restoration and discipleship of those who may have attained "sonship" but are falling short of achieving "discipleship".