

# Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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## Studies in John's Gospel: John 21

Each year at our children's camp we go fishing. It's a special group activity called fluking, which involves catching flat fish with your feet. Enthusiasm for this sport is generated by the camp leader and tradition dictates that this is an essential qualification for someone in the position of leadership. Usually we do catch some flounders, but there have been fluking expeditions when we've returned empty-handed. John 21 relates such a fishing trip. The disciples had gone into Galilee after the resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ because He'd said that He would meet them there in a mountain, Matthew 26:32; 28:10 and 16. Whilst waiting there, Peter decided to return to his former occupation of fishing. Six other disciples joined him, but *"that night they caught nothing"*, 21:3, similar to an earlier incident in Peter's life, see Luke 5:5. Whatever our thoughts are about Peter leading this group of disciples off into this activity, it gave the Lord Jesus another opportunity to reveal Himself to the disciples collectively, that is, to show them that He was alive again from the dead, verses 1 and 14. (In passing we note that the first occasion was in the evening of the day of His resurrection, when He showed them His hands and His side, 20:19-23; whilst the second occasion was a week later when Thomas saw Jesus in the same way and confessed *"My Lord and My God"*, 20:26-29.)

Today, we'll talk about this third meeting of Jesus with His disciples and we'll divide the chapter up into sections headed:

- Evangelism, as illustrated by the disciples going fishing.
- Fellowship, as illustrated by the disciples sharing a meal.
- Christian Shepherding.
- Christian Discipleship.
- Conclusions about John and his Gospel.

But first of all, I should point out that John 21 describes Christian activities which remain valid for the whole of the Christian era, that is, from the ascension of the Lord Jesus into heaven until He returns again according to His promise: *"I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to Myself; that where I am, there you may be also"*, 14:3. In 21:23, He used the words "until I come" to Peter and they would link to His instructions to His servants in Luke 19:13: *"engage in [My] business until I come"*. It seems to me that the activities of fishing, feeding, shepherding and discipleship describe some of the ways believers can answer to these instructions. By these, I mean spiritual activities of Christian service, as we'll see when we come to each section.

### Evangelism as illustrated by the disciples going fishing, verses 1-11

To understand what the term fishing means when applied to the Christian life, we must go back to Matthew 4 when Jesus called Peter, together with his brother, Andrew, and their partners, James and John, to leave their earthly occupation as fishermen and to follow Him. He said to them: *"Follow Me, and I will make you fishers of men"*, Matthew 4:19. Peter later learned that the spiritual equivalent of fishing was evangelism by the preaching of the Word of God. Jesus had borrowed his boat and had taught the people from it. After Jesus had preached, He told Peter to launch out into the deep and to let his nets down. Although the previous night they hadn't caught anything, Peter did so and the net was now full and breaking. This greatly affected Peter and *"he fell down at Jesus' knees, saying, 'Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord!'"*, Luke 5:8. But Jesus replied: *"Do not be afraid. From now on you will catch men." So when they had brought their boats to land, they forsook all and followed Him*, Luke 5:10-11. The lesson was clear - people would be converted (caught like fish) when the Gospel is preached.

As we've seen already, the post-resurrection incident in John 21 was very much a repeat of the Luke 5 incident in that they'd fished all night long but hadn't caught any! However, at the command of the Lord from the shore of the Sea of Tiberias, a great quantity fish was caught.

John immediately recognised the sign of the Lord's presence and exclaimed to Peter *"It is the Lord"*, verse 7. Peter impulsively plunged into the sea to be first ashore to the Master. (Again, in passing, we should notice that the words *"It is the Lord"* are a summary of John's Gospel in that they point out who it is that he has written about, *"written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name"*, 20:31.)

The main lesson from the fishing incident in 21:1-11 is that the Lord expects us to give priority to the preaching of the Gospel. Sometimes this will mean leaving behind secular work, as it did for Peter and his companions that day. More particularly, it means that we must recognise that in fishing for souls, human efforts are useless apart from divine help! From the Lord's question: "Children, have you any food", verse 5, we learn that the secret of success is to be directed by the Lord Himself because He knows where there are souls to be saved. Verse 11 describes the catch that day: "*Simon Peter went up and dragged the net to land, full of large fish, one hundred and fifty-three; and although there were so many, the net was not broken*". I've read and heard many different explanations about what the number 153 means. The only one that helps me is that there were 153 known languages in the known world at that time. That suggests to me that the Gospel net would spread out into the whole world, which is in keeping with the tone of John's Gospel that: "*God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life*", 3:16. In other words, in telling out this message we're all Gospel fishermen!

### **Fellowship as illustrated by the disciples sharing a meal, verses 12-14**

When the disciples arrived on shore, they found that breakfast had already been prepared for them by the Lord Himself. It consisted of fish, cooked on a fire, and bread. However, the Lord invited them to bring some of the fish they'd caught and to "*come and dine*", verse 12. They had fellowship together over the breakfast as they enjoyed the provisions of their gracious Host.

In the parables of Luke 15 there's the repeated exclamation of "*joy in the presence of the angels over one sinner who repents*". The breakfast on the seashore here in John 21 would perhaps indicate the joint pleasure of both Master and servant in the success of the Gospel message.

The most important meal for believers is the Lord's Supper, with the bread and wine - symbols of His body broken in death and of His blood shed. "*The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not the communion of the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not the communion of the body of Christ? For we, though many, are one bread and one body; for we all partake of that one bread*", 1 Corinthians 10:16-17. Communion is Christian fellowship with the Lord Jesus and with each other. A hymn expresses it in this way:

*Jesus, Lord, we come together  
In the bonds of Thine own love;  
Thou hast drawn our footsteps hither,  
Its deep meaning now to prove.*

*Closed the door - we leave behind us  
Toil and conflict, foes and strife;  
And within, Thy love doth bind us  
In one fellowship of life.*

*Here together we recall Thee,  
In Thy presence break the bread;  
Never more can grief befall Thee,  
Thou art risen from the dead.*

*But Thy love remains, that entered  
Into death to make us Thine;  
In that death all love was centred -  
Thankful now we drink the wine*

*Thou dost make us taste the blessing,  
Soon to fill a world of bliss;  
And we bless Thy name confessing  
Thine own love our portion is.*

*Sweet it is to sit before Thee,  
Sweet to hear Thy blessed voice,  
Sweet to worship and adore Thee,  
While our hearts in Thee rejoice.*

But the table of the Lord would also speak to us of the place where believers receive spiritual food both to satisfy their souls and to sustain them along the difficult and trying Christian pathway. Whether it's in church or in daily communion with the Lord through prayer and reading of the Scriptures, His gracious invitation remains open to us: "*come and dine*".

### Christian Shepherding, verses 15-17

John 21 is perhaps best known for the searching interview Peter had with the risen Lord when breakfast was over that morning. On the night of the Lord's betrayal, Peter had claimed: *"Even if all are made to stumble because of You, I will never be made to stumble"*, Matthew 26:33. The Lord Jesus therefore asked him in John 21:15: *"Simon, son of Jonah, do you love Me more than these [other disciples]?"* Much has been written and preached about the different Greek words for love employed in these questions and answers. But more importantly, this thrice repeated question *"Simon, son of Jonah, do you love Me?"* was necessary to probe Peter's conscience. The interview was designed to rebuke his three public denials. I pause here to ask what is my track record in matters of faithfulness to our rejected Lord? Would I have behaved any better than Peter? Sadly, many of us have to admit that self-confidence has often been a source of failure with us too, and that we haven't confessed Jesus as Lord in difficult or threatening circumstances. It's wonderful to know that the restoring grace of Christ is available for us too if we repent as Peter did.

Peter's affirmation of his genuine love for the One whom he'd so desperately wanted to follow even unto death, together with his sincere repentance, enables him to be wonderfully and fully restored to serve his Lord. The Lord was true to His promise: *"Simon, Simon! Indeed, Satan has asked for you, that he may sift you as wheat. But I have prayed for you, that your faith should not fail; and when you have returned to Me, strengthen your brethren"*, Luke 22:31-32. Peter was given a new threefold commission, following his threefold confession *"You know that I love You"*.

1. First of all, the Lord said to Peter: *"Feed my lambs"*. People who are caught, as it were, in the Gospel net become babes in God's family. New converts are to be cared for and fed on the Word of God so that they might be established and become strong in the faith. *"Like newborn infants, long for the pure, spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow into salvation"*, 1 Peter 2:2 (English Standard Version).
2. Secondly the Lord instructed Peter to *"shepherd My sheep"*.
3. Thirdly, Peter was told to *"feed My sheep"*.

Christian shepherding is to care for, and look after, believers in similar ways to that of a shepherd who takes care of his sheep. Believers are to have genuine care for each other because they're the people of God, His flock. Whilst every Christian is expected to show this practical loving care for fellow believers, pastors are required to occupy this oversight position in each local church. As a shepherd leads his sheep, these spiritual shepherds must lead their flock by example. They must guide them, guard them, and look out for the weak and failing to bring them back when they stray. To be successful, they must love their Master, the Good Shepherd and practically show this by being like Him. Peter was so true to this commission that he exhorted others: *"Now as an elder...I exhort the elders among you to tend the flock of God that is in your charge, exercising the oversight, not under compulsion but willingly, as God would have you do it - not for sordid gain but eagerly. Do not lord it over those in your charge, but be examples to the flock"*, 1 Peter 5:1-3 (New Revised Standard Version).

### Christian Discipleship, verses 18-23

Peter may have been exasperated by the thrice repeated question for his final answer was: *"Lord, You know everything; You know that I love You"*, verse 17 (New Revised Standard Version). Next the Lord showed Peter that He does, in reality, know everything when He prophesied how Peter's life would end: *"Most assuredly, I say to you, when you were younger, you girded yourself and walked where you wished; but when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and another will gird you and carry you where you do not wish."* This He spoke, signifying by what death he would glorify God," verses 18-19 (New King James Version). This meant that Peter would be crucified for his faith in Christ. Then he would indeed follow his Master! But Peter had to learn that, as a disciple, **all** of his life was at the disposal of the Lord.

Peter's interview wasn't over yet. There was one final piece of total commitment that the Lord wanted from him. Jesus commanded him: *"Follow Me"*, but, as he turned to follow, he noticed his friend John behind him and this distracted him from the task. Peter said to Jesus, *"But Lord, what about this man?"* verse 21. The Lord's answer was both firm and direct: *"What is that to you? You follow Me"*, verse 22. Effectively the Lord was saying that Peter must only concern himself with finding out his Master's will for himself, and focussing on it, to the exclusion of all else in life. It's so easy for any disciple to be taken up with other things, no matter how legitimate they may be, such as what the Lord wants so and so to do. Whilst Christian shepherding may be about concern for the good of others, discipleship is to forsake everything and, as an individual, to follow Christ. It's to know His will for my life! I'm reminded of a hymn I used to sing in my youth:

*I want to walk with Jesus Christ,*

*All the days I live of this life on earth,  
To give to Him complete control  
Of body and of soul:*

*Follow Him, follow Him, yield your life to Him,  
He has conquered death, He is King of kings,  
Accept the joy that He gives to those  
Who yield their lives to Him.*

Peter's question about John brought an extraordinary response from the Lord, a response which contains a certain mystery in it: *"If it is My will that he remain until I come, what is that to you? You follow Me"*, verse 22. It certainly produced much speculation amongst the Christian company in John's day! *"Then this saying went out among the brethren that this disciple would not die. Yet Jesus did not say to him that he would not die, but, 'If I will that he remain till I come, what is that to you?'"*, verse 23. We know that John did indeed die. So exactly what did Jesus mean? The best explanation I've heard is that the Lord was indicating the abiding character of John's ministry. John's Gospel is principally about eternal life found in Christ. For example, 20:31: *"these [signs] are written [in this book] that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name"*. This offer of salvation remains open until the Lord Jesus comes again, when all believers will enter into the fullness of eternal life.

I've always been thankful for the inclusion in this chapter of 'the gossip' about John in verses 22 and 23. In my short lifetime, there have been many rumours circulating amongst Christians. Some were true, but others not. Some were exaggerated. Others were altered in some way, or distorted. Some have even been about me! With such gossip, we should be like John and leave these unimportant things in God's hand for Him to put the record straight in His own good time.

### **Conclusions: John and his Gospel, verses 24-25**

To summarise our talk on John 21, we can say that it's about the risen Lord:

- Who directs our service, verses 1-11
- Who provides for our fellowship, verses 12-14
- Who demands our affections, verses 15-17
- Who determines our destiny, verses 18-23

But Peter's final question in verse 21 brought John into focus. For the first time in his Gospel, he properly identifies himself as its writer: *"This is the disciple who testifies of these things, and wrote these things; and we know that his testimony is true"*, verse 24. He has previously referred to himself in different ways:

- He was one of the two disciples of John the Baptist whose testimony caused them to leave him and to follow Jesus, 1:29-40.
- He was the disciple who leant on Jesus' bosom, 13:23 and 25; 21:20.
- When compared to Peter, He was simply the other disciple, 18:15-16 and 20:3-4 and 8.
- He was also the disciple whom Jesus loved, 13:23; 19:26-27; 20:2-4; 21:7, 20 and 23-24.

In verse 24 John verifies the truth of his writings. As he writes in his first epistle: *"We have seen and testify that the Father has sent the Son as Saviour of the world"*, 1 John 4:14.

With verse 25, John signs off his Gospel: *"there are also many other things that Jesus did, which if they were written one by one, I suppose that even the world itself could not contain the books that would be written. Amen."* John isn't exaggerating. He was being literal about what he, and the other disciples, had seen and heard about this infinite Person, Jesus the Son. He told us in 20:30-31 that he had been deliberately selective in writing, choosing only those signs which would highlight Jesus as both the Christ and the Son of God. He made clear his objective in doing so was that you and I would believe on that Name and receive eternal life. As we end our series of talks about John's Gospel, our prayer is that everyone who hears this Gospel may receive this blessing. John starkly states the choice each person has to make: *"[whoever] believes in the Son has everlasting life; and [whoever] does not believe the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him"*, 3:36.

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