

“We Know that His Testimony is True”

The Sixty-Fourth and Final in a Series of Sermons on the Gospel of John

Texts: John 21:15-25; Ezekiel 34:11-31

Jesus has but a few final words for his disciples before he ascends into heaven. That night on which they celebrated the Passover together now seems so long time ago in light of all of the things which have happened since. Jesus has since been arrested, tried, crucified, rose again from the dead, and then appeared to his disciples three times—twice in Jerusalem, and once in Galilee. The fundamental character of redemptive history has changed. Jesus will reinstate Peter as chief apostle, and prepare the others for a new phase of redemptive history, when Jesus pours out his Holy Spirit upon them on the Day of Pentecost. Jesus’ disciples will go and preach the gospel to the ends of the earth, and in doing so, will turn the whole world upside down.

We have finally come to the end of our series on the Gospel of John. Sixty-four sermons, twenty one chapters, eight-hundred and seventy-nine verses. This is truly an amazing document—especially in comparison to the synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke). John’s Gospel has many affinities with the other gospels, yet at the same time John has a completely different organizational structure and unique points of emphasis. Hopefully, John’s Gospel will remain familiar to us as we move on to new biblical texts in the weeks to come. Now that we know John’s Gospel a bit better, it is my hope that we all turn to it often and read through it regularly. This gospel is too important to neglect.

As I pointed out last time when we began going through the epilogue of John (the 21st chapter), critical scholars tend to argue that this chapter is an appendage—not an integral part of the gospel, and tagged on to the end by either John, or someone else. As we saw, however, these verses make an important point and are not carelessly stuck on to the end of John’s summary statement in 20:30-31 as critical scholars believe. Recall that in his summary statement, John writes, “*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.*” This is both a summary statement of the content of his gospel, as well as a challenge to all who read and hear the gospel to believe in Jesus Christ.

In context, John’s point about believing in Jesus and then possessing life in his name is tied to the blessing which Jesus extends to the doubting Thomas, as well as to those, who, unlike Thomas, believe in Jesus based upon the testimony of those who did see Jesus’ miracles and heard him preach. John says “*blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.*” In addition to defining the promised blessings, John’s summary statement also wraps-up his account Jesus’ post-resurrection appearances in Jerusalem. Yet several important things do occur after the risen Jesus appears to his disciples in a locked room in Jerusalem eight days after Easter. These things are recounted in John 21.

In chapter twenty-one the scene shifts from Jerusalem to the Galilee region at some point in the days and weeks after Jesus appeared to his disciples on two different occasions in Jerusalem. After this, the disciples (at least those mentioned here by John) returned to their home towns and their previous vocation—fishing. Although Jesus told them that he would go ahead of them to the Galilee, they did not recognize Jesus when he began speaking to them from the shore. Given the difficulties of grasping the new realities of redemptive-history after Jesus was raised from the dead, the disciples do not expect that

Jesus was the one speaking to them from the water's edge as they struggled to get their boat ashore.

After a long and frustrating night of fishing in which they caught nothing, the disciples had called it a night and then headed in. While still one hundred yards out, someone begins speaking to them from the shore, directing them to a new spot to drop their nets. Taking the stranger's advice, the disciples move to his suggested location and were immediately successful. Once the disciples realize that it is Jesus speaking to them, and after the disciples got their boat and their 153 fish ashore, Jesus served them a breakfast meal of fish and bread. The meal confirms to them that Jesus is still very much alive, that he still humbly serves them (even after the resurrection), and that he desires fellowship with them.

In verse 12 of chapter 21, John tells us that "*none of the disciples dared ask him, 'Who are you?'*" *They knew it was the Lord.*" Remarkably, "*Jesus came and took the bread and gave it to them, and so with the fish.*" Although John does not say that Jesus actually ate fish and bread with his disciples—it is implied. Luke tells us that when Jesus appeared to his disciples in Jerusalem, he asked for a piece of broiled fish and ate in their presence. Of course, in his resurrected body, Jesus did not need food for nourishment. Rather, Jesus ate fish to show his disciples that he was truly and bodily raised from the dead. Here on the Sea of Galilee, Jesus not only serves his disciples breakfast, he enjoys a fellowship meal with those with whom he spent three years, and to whom he must give final instructions before the Day of Pentecost arrives, when an entirely new phase of Jesus' ministry, as well as theirs, will begin.

John tells us, "*this was now the third time that Jesus was revealed to the disciples after he was raised from the dead.*" Jesus' post-resurrection appearances (the three of them recorded by John—Paul and Luke tell us of additional appearances) serve several very important purposes. For one thing, these appearances serve to convince Jesus' disciples (as in the case of Thomas) that Jesus had truly risen from the dead in fulfillment of numerous Old Testament prophecies, as well as to fulfill those promises which Jesus himself had made to his disciples throughout his messianic mission—that he must go to Jerusalem, where he would be put to death, and then rise from the death three days later. The first purpose, then, of these post-resurrection appearances is to confirm the truth of Jesus' teaching, the fact of his resurrection from the dead, and to confirm that Jesus will be present with his disciples until the end of the age, just as he promised he would be.

The second reason for Jesus' post-resurrection appearances is to demonstrate that the entire course of redemptive history has now changed with his death and resurrection. That which Jesus promised—to secure the salvation of all of those given to Jesus by the Father—is now a reality. Jesus' resurrected body is the first indication of the scope of Jesus' victory over death and the grave and points ahead to the general resurrection at the end of the age. After Jesus' resurrection, God's people enter a new period of redemptive history, soon to be inaugurated at Pentecost, and consummated at Jesus' second coming. When Jesus rises from the dead, the new creation dawns, God's holy justice has been satisfied through Jesus' death upon the cross, and in his resurrection even death itself has been defeated. Jesus now possesses a transformed human body; he is able to eat fish, walk through walls, and yet remain identifiable—unless prevented from doing so, his disciples recognize him when he appears.

The third reason for Jesus' post-resurrection appearances is to prepare the disciples for Pentecost. In the Upper Room Discourse, Jesus told his disciples that he must depart and go to prepare a place for them. Before the resurrection, his statement made little sense. Now Jesus' words take on a whole new meaning and importance. Jesus also told the disciples that they will be continuing that work which he has commenced, and that they will do so in the power of the Comforter (the Holy Spirit). This is why it is to their advantage that Jesus leave them. With Jesus' disciples now back in Galilee, Jesus appears to them

so as to prepare them for their return journey to Jerusalem, where they will begin to preach the message (the gospel) which Jesus has now entrusted unto them. All that remains is for Jesus to give his disciples final instructions, which, Jesus does in the closing words of chapter 21, which are also the concluding words of John's Gospel.

Beginning in verse 15, John wraps up the epilogue of his Gospel by recounting Jesus' final instructions to Peter. John tells us that "*when they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, 'Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?'*" The context for this final conversation between Jesus and Peter are those previous instances in Jesus' Upper Room Discourse when Peter spoke passionately of his absolute commitment to Jesus' and his mission, but which was then followed by Peter's act of cowardice in denying Jesus under the threat of arrest.

In John 13:8, when Jesus washed the disciples' feet, it was Peter who protested: "*You shall never wash my feet.*" Jesus mildly rebuked him. "*If I do not wash you, you have no share with me.*" Peter thought Jesus was being overly-humble, and that Peter should be washing Jesus' feet not the other way around. Then, in verses 37-38, of the same chapter when Jesus spoke of departing from his disciples, it was Peter who objected. "*Simon Peter said to him, 'Lord, where are you going?' Jesus answered him, 'Where I am going you cannot follow me now, but you will follow afterward.'* Peter said to him, 'Lord, why can I not follow you now? I will lay down my life for you.' Jesus answered, 'Will you lay down your life for me? Truly, truly, I say to you, the rooster will not crow till you have denied me three times.'"

Finally, in John 18:10-11 when Jesus was arrested, it was Peter who sought to defend him. "*Then Simon Peter, having a sword, drew it and struck the high priest's servant and cut off his right ear. (The servant's name was Malchus.) So Jesus said to Peter, 'Put your sword into its sheath; shall I not drink the cup that the Father has given me?'*" This is the same disciple who, after proclaiming his undying loyalty to Jesus then denied three times that he even knew Jesus, including once to a little girl, who happened to recognize Peter as one who had been with Jesus earlier that evening in Gethsemane!

So, when Jesus asks Peter, "*do you love me more than these?*" Jesus is, in effect, publically reinstating Peter in the presence of all the other disciples, before revealing to him that his own fate will require a sacrifice which matches his personal bravado.¹ Jesus is now asking Peter in front of the others if he (Peter) loves Jesus more than they do. Jesus' question challenges Peter based upon Peter's previous boasts which we just read. Peter is the one who promised to lay down his life, and he was the one willing to take up the sword to protect Jesus. But does Peter truly love Jesus enough to die for the cause of preaching the gospel?

The question itself indicates that Jesus has already forgiven Peter. In asking these questions of Peter in public, Jesus is preparing him for the revelation that Peter eventually will be called by God to actually demonstrate this zeal in action as the leader of the early church (until superceded by James—Acts 15, and then by Paul—Galatians 2). Peter is about to learn that his boast of being willing to lay down his life for Jesus will become a reality.

As we would expect of him, Peter quickly answers Jesus' question in the affirmative. [Peter] "*said to him, 'Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.'*" But wisely, exercising caution we are not used to seeing from Peter, he does not tell Jesus, "of course, I love you more than these guys do"—putting himself in the

¹ Carson, The Gospel of John, 675.

superior place in the comparison. Rather, Peter appeals to Jesus' knowledge of Peter's heart. Lord, "*you know that I love you.*" Jesus' response to Peter is to accept his assertion, and then instruct Peter, "*feed my lambs.*" In John 10, you may recall, Jesus declared himself to be Israel's "good shepherd," the one who will truly care for God's flock. Jesus will feed his people (those given him by the Father), care for them (giving them the living water and the bread from heaven), and then give his life for them. As Jesus declared in John 10:11, "*I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.*"

Jesus' command to Peter to feed "my lambs" contains a very loud echo from several messianic passages such as Jeremiah 3:15, Isaiah 44:28, as well as the whole of Ezekiel 34 (of which we read a significant portion as our Old Testament lesson). These passages speak of Israel's coming messiah as the true shepherd who will truly care for God's sheep, completely devoted to their welfare, as well as being willing to protect them to the point of laying down his own life. Clearly, these passages from Israel's prophets point ahead to Jesus, who as Israel's Messiah, fulfills them.² This was the theme of Jesus' "Good Shepherd" discourse in John 10. But in light of the change in the nature of redemptive history post-resurrection, since Jesus, the Good Shepherd, will ascend into heaven, then his own chosen disciples will share in his care for his flock—"my lambs." Jesus will tend his flock (the church) through a series of under-shepherds who will minister to God's people in the name and at the command of Jesus.

Peter is the first of those who will be called and then commissioned to do this. After Pentecost, and the great expansion of the church from a few disciples into many thousands of believers, the apostles themselves will commission additional ministers and elders to shepherd the various churches that are founded throughout the Greco-Roman world. This is a process which continues down to the present day. So, when Jesus tells Peter to "*feed my lambs,*" Jesus is calling Peter to tend to God's sheep in the name of Jesus, just as Jesus himself would do. Peter is to care for God's flock—the true Israel. He is to feed Jesus' lambs with the same spiritual food that Jesus has given to him—the word of God.

But Jesus is not yet finished with this process of reinstating Peter. According to verse 16, Jesus "*said to [Peter] a second time, 'Simon, son of John, do you love me?'*" [Peter] *said to him, 'Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.'* He *said to him, 'Tend my sheep.'*" Still, Jesus is not finished with Peter. [Jesus] "*said to him the third time, 'Simon, son of John, do you love me?'*" This time, John tells us that "*Peter was grieved because [Jesus] said to him the third time, 'Do you love me?'*" Again, Peter "*said to [Jesus], 'Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you.'*" And a third time, Jesus "*said to [Peter], 'Feed my sheep.'*" Why the repetition of the same question three times? Especially when Peter is described as being grieved by the whole process.

The answer is a simple one and the key to understand why this chapter is essential to John's account of those things Jesus said and did. Since Jesus is publically reinstating Peter and commissioning him for service as a shepherd of Christ's flock, Peter must answer Jesus' questions three times *because* Peter disowned Jesus three times. Peter confesses that Jesus truly knows his heart, and that Peter really does love his master. Peter disowned Jesus three times, so Peter must confess his love for Jesus three times. This is not punishment in the sense that Jesus wants an eye for an eye. This is done so as to absolve Peter publically and re-establish him as the *de facto* leader of the disciples until replaced by others.

Furthermore, the fact that Jesus commands Peter three times to "*feed my lambs*" reinforces the idea that Peter is to be a shepherd of a flock which is not his own. The sheep are Christ's—"my lambs." Peter is to

² Beale and Carson, Commentary of the New Testament Use of the Old Testament, 507.

feed Christ's sheep, as Jesus commands him to do. Therefore, it should not come as a surprise that in the fifth chapter of his own "First" epistle, Peter writes to other shepherds commissioned by Christ: "*So I exhort the elders among you, as a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as a partaker in the glory that is going to be revealed: shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you; not for shameful gain, but eagerly; not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock. And when the chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory. Likewise, you who are younger, be subject to the elders. Clothe yourselves, all of you, with humility toward one another, for 'God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.'*" In these verses, Peter applies the same command Jesus has given to him, those who elders who will come after him.

It also should come as no surprise that Roman Catholic commentators and theologians have seized upon John 21:15-17 as supposed proof that Jesus appointed Peter to be the first Pope, and that Jesus gave to Peter the same authority now claimed by the Roman church and held by Peter's successors. Roman Catholic scholars often appeal to David's connection of the service of a shepherd to the authority of Israel's king. In 2 Samuel 5:2, we read, "*in times past, when Saul was king over us, it was you who led out and brought in Israel. And the LORD said to you, 'You shall be shepherd of my people Israel, and you shall be prince over Israel.'*" Since Israel's king is both a shepherd and a ruler, Rome argues, the Pope holds the same offices—shepherd of the flock, and head of the church.

Nowhere in John 21 does Jesus affirm that Peter rules the sheep (as Jesus' earthly replacement) as the first in a series of rulers. The sheep remain "his" [Jesus'] sheep, and Peter and those after him (the elders and overseers) are to serve them by feeding "Jesus' lambs" with the words of Jesus! In 1 Peter 5, as we have previously read, Peter exhorts those elders ruling in the churches to do the same things which Jesus now commands Peter to do. In fact, one might reasonably conclude from the Book of Acts and from Peter's letter that the early church was "Presbyterian." Peter speaks of many elders ruling the church together in mutual submission to Christ, some of whom (the ministers) are to devote themselves full-time to prayer and the ministry of the word. The idea that Jesus establishes Peter's authority as first of a series of "popes" is not found anywhere in John 21:15-17, despite Roman claims to the contrary. Jesus is reinstating Peter in preparation for Pentecost, not investing Peter with Christ's own authority to rule the church. There is one shepherd (Christ), but a multitude of under-shepherds (first the apostles, and then when they die off, ministers and elders).

In verse 18, Jesus reveals to Peter what the future will hold for him, in the form of a parable. "*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.*" As a young man, Peter has the freedom and vitality to go about preaching the gospel as commanded by Jesus. But there will come a time ("*when you are old*"), when Peter's movements will be restricted—he will not have the freedom to do as he previously could. Furthermore, when Jesus tells Peter that he will "stretch out his hands," Jesus is using a well-known metaphor for crucifixion.³

That Jesus is telling Peter that he will be arrested, unable to move about freely, and that he will be put to death by crucifixion (just as Jesus was) becomes clear in John's word of explanation in verse 19. "*This he said to show by what kind of death he was to glorify God.*" In his First Epistle, Clement of Rome (written about A.D. 95) speaks of Peter's death in the city of Rome at the hand of Nero. A number of

³ Carson, The Gospel According to Jesus, 679.

third century church fathers confirm this, although the legend eventually arose that Peter insisted upon being crucified upside down because he was unworthy to die as Jesus did.

The reason why John recounts this is that Peter died as a martyr in Rome just as Jesus predicted—this event would have been known to many of John’s readers (since his Gospel was written within a generation of Peter’s death). The death of the chief apostle at the hands of Nero was not only foretold by Jesus, Peter’s martyrdom actually furthered the spread of the gospel. Until his death, Peter devoted himself to feeding Christ’s lambs—which he did, faithfully—as one of several key figures in the early church (along with James, John, and Paul).

After reinstating Peter, Jesus addresses Peter’s concern about John’s future. *“And after saying this [Jesus] said to [Peter], ‘Follow me.’”* As Peter and Jesus walk together, Peter raises a question about John, who was by now following behind them. According to verse 20, *“Peter turned and saw the disciple whom Jesus loved following them [i.e., John], 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?’”* Having learned of his own fate, Peter is curious about John’s. As we read in verse 22, *“When Peter saw [John], he said to Jesus, ‘Lord, what about this man?’”* Peter now learns that John’s fate is not the same as his.

If John wrote his Gospel at some point after 70 A.D. (which is likely), perhaps writing as late as 90 A.D. (Although mid 70's-80's is more likely), John who was a young man when he began following Jesus, is writing this account at a good old age, looking back on this about two generations after these things happened in Galilee. If this event described by John occurred in 33 A.D., and Peter died about 66 A.D., then John has lived an entire generation longer than Peter. When *“Jesus said to”* [Peter], in verse 22, *“if it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you? You follow me!”* John is recounting Jesus’ prediction that John will not be martyred.

Given the fact that John probably died in the city of Ephesus at some point in the 90's, this would explain his comment in verse 23-24. *“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?’”* Peter will die a martyr in Rome, and John will be the only one of the original disciples not martyred. In fact, several church fathers report that John died of old age in Ephesus after composing this gospel, the three epistles which bear his name, and the Book of Revelation—making him one of the chief authors of the New Testament along with Luke and Paul.

Having explained his longevity, John closes his Gospel by reiterating the point he made earlier in verses 30-31 of the previous chapter. *“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. 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’s testimony is spelled out in the 21 chapters of his Gospel. He has made his case, and shown us who Jesus is, how God proved that Jesus is who he claims to be, and that we must trust in Jesus to have eternal life. He could have written much, much, more about the ministry of Jesus. But at some point the case is made, and now the reader is called to act upon the things John has set forth. John has proven that Jesus is the Christ and the son of God. *And we know that his testimony is true.* The only question remaining, is do you believe John’s testimony?

And so here ends the Gospel of John, as well as our study of this remarkable gospel.