

## Follow Me

*These Things are Written that You May Believe Series*

**John 21:1-25**

Pastor Bryan Clark

Okay, so you've blown it. You've made a mess of things. And ever since, you've been sitting on the bench, because you are convinced God could never use you again. If that is your story, I invite you to listen carefully to the story in our final chapter of the Gospel of John. If you have a Bible, turn with us to John Chapter 21, the final chapter in the Gospel of John. Verse 1:

**After these things Jesus manifested Himself again to the disciples at the Sea of Tiberias, and He manifested *Himself* in this way. Simon Peter, and Thomas called Didymus, and Nathanael of Cana in Galilee, and the *sons* of Zebedee, and two others of His disciples were together. Simon 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.** (\*NASB, John 21:1-3)

The Feast of Unleavened Bread has come to an end, and the disciples have made their way back north to Galilee. The Sea of Tiberias, the Sea of Galilee—it's the same sea—is about seventy-five miles north and, for most of these disciples, this was home. They were certainly excited, having seen the resurrected Jesus, but probably quite confused as to what the future held. For one particular disciple, Peter—I have no question—he was in absolute agony. Just a couple of weeks prior, in the moment of truth, he had, three times, denied that he knew Jesus. And he knew that Jesus knew that he had denied Him. I'm certain Peter was excited that Jesus had risen from the dead, but I'm also convinced Peter thought he had blown it and he was no longer useful to the Master. In this moment, Peter doesn't know what else to do but to go back to what he's always known: “**I am going fishing.**”

It was customary that the fishermen would fish at night. But, at the end of that night, as the sun begins to rise, they had caught nothing. Now it's good to keep in mind, several of these fishermen were professional fishermen. This is how they had made their living before Jesus called them to be disciples. But this is the problem with failure: Failure is infectious, and pretty soon we find ourselves failing at everything we touch, until we finally feel like, “I can't do anything right.” Verse 4:

**But when the day was now breaking, Jesus stood on the beach; yet the disciples did not know that it was Jesus. So Jesus said to them, “Children, you do not have any fish, do you?” They answered Him, “No.” And 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. Therefore 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. But 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*.** (Vs. 4-8)

So, the sun is just coming up; the light is dim. Jesus shows up on the beach. He's about a hundred yards away so He calls to them. The NASB translates it “**Children**,” which is a bit confusing for us. It carries more the idea of boys. We'd probably say, “Hey, guys, have you caught any fish?” But the question actually implies, “You haven't caught any fish, have you?” And they answer grumpily, “No.”

And Jesus says, “Tell you what, cast the net on the other side of the boat.” Jesus does not say, “I know a really good spot way over there.” This is the other side of a small boat! But, for whatever reason, Jesus is compelling. They do it, and their net is so full of fish, they can't even pull it in.

This is not the first time this has happened. Luke chapter 5 records an event early in the relationship between these men and Jesus when something similar happened and, at the end of that event, Jesus called them, “From now on, you will be *fishers of men*.” That was Peter's calling. But now he has taken himself off the team. Jesus hasn't asked him to sit on the bench. He's made the decision to sit on the bench, and what he needs in this moment is to be recalled. So John, true to his personality, connects the dots and puts it together, and he says to Peter, “**It is the Lord!**” Peter, true to his personality, either puts on his outer garment or, more likely, just means he tucked or girded it up so he could dive into the water and swim to the shore. For whatever reason, impulsive Peter couldn't wait for the boat; he's swimming to shore himself. And John tells us the rest of them had to somehow get to shore lugging this net full of fish. Verse 9:

**So when they got out on the land, they \*saw a charcoal fire *already* laid and fish placed on it, and bread. Jesus said to them, “Bring some of the fish which you have now caught.” Simon 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.** (Vs. 9-11)

They get to shore, and there's Jesus. He's already got a **charcoal fire with bread and fish**. There are only two times in the Gospel of John that we read about a charcoal fire. One is chapter 18. Three times around a charcoal fire, Peter denied he knew Jesus. Now, a second conversation around a charcoal fire is where Peter will be recalled to service. It's interesting that John is careful to tell us Jesus already had fish and bread. When Jesus called for them to cast the net on the other side of the boat, it's not because He needed breakfast. He already had breakfast. He didn't need them; they needed Him. That's why Jesus says, “**Bring the fish that you have *now* caught.**” In other words, “No fish all night, till I get here. Now you've caught fish.” He's reminding them what He told them in the Upper Room, “*Without Me, you cannot do anything.*”

Some people try to make some significance out of the number **a hundred and fifty-three** fish, but all of those are very fanciful. It's just an eyewitness recording the events as they happened. Verse 12:

**Jesus said to them, “Come *and* have breakfast.” None of the disciples ventured to question Him, “Who are You?” knowing that it was the Lord. Jesus came and took the bread and gave *it* to them, and the fish likewise. This is now the third time that Jesus was manifested to the disciples, after He was raised from the dead.** (Vs. 12-14)

So, there are various appearances of Jesus if you read the four Gospels, but this is the third time He's appeared to the disciples as a group since the resurrection. There are multiple things about this paragraph that I love. One of them, as I mentioned last week, is this is as close as we can get to trying to understand what it will be like after the resurrection, in other words, life after death. Jesus is identified as the first fruit—in a sense the prototype. So, as we get, at least, some sense of this, we will not be disembodied spirits floating around the universe. It is this body that will be resurrected and changed—similar, but different. You see, Jesus knows them; Jesus remembers them; and they know Jesus. They talk together; they laugh together; they eat together; they drink together; they share life together. It's this beautiful moment. It's a little bit of a picture of the world to come.

I love it that Jesus did not show up on the beach glowing, preach a sermon, and disappear. Most of us have seen the pictures of Jesus ascending and He's glowing and there are beams of light, and the disciples are on their knees on the Mount of Olives. That's why I'm thankful for *this* picture, because it's much more real. It's much more personable. It's Jesus with His friends, restoring a relationship and eating breakfast together. When John tells us none of them asked, **“Who are you?”** for they knew it was the Lord, what he's saying is they didn't ask **“Who ARE you?”** In other words, they're still trying to come to grips with the wonder that their friend, whom they have spent three years with—walking together, doing ministry together, laughing together—is actually the eternal God, the Creator of the universe in human flesh. Can you imagine how difficult it would be to come to grips with that? They're still trying to figure this out. **“Who ARE you?”** The wonder of this moment...but Jesus has unfinished business with Peter. Verse 15:

**So 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.” He 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.” He 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.”** (Vs. 15-17)

Now, there's a lot going on in that paragraph. John has been careful to refer to Peter as *Simon Peter* through the chapter, but in this moment, around a charcoal fire, Jesus refers to him as **Simon, son of John**, which was his given name. It was Jesus who renamed Peter, Peter. He said, “Peter, I'm going to call you Peter and you're going to be a rock.” But now, because of Peter's failure, he's convinced he's no longer fit for service. He's pulled himself off the team. He's going back to fishing.

So Jesus is reflecting that, saying, **“Simon, son of John,”** that's who you were before you met Me. Do you love Me? **Do you love me more than these?”** Who are the **these**? These are the other disciples. You say, “Well, that's a rather strange question to ask.” It goes back to a conversation in the Upper Room just a few weeks prior, when Jesus told them that all of them will fall away in His hour of need. And it was Peter, boastful Peter, that said, “These schmucks (that's my word) may all fall away, but I won't fall away,” implying, “I love you more than these.” But, in the moment of truth, three times, *they* didn't deny Jesus. Peter denied Jesus. So Jesus is asking, “Peter, do you still think you love Me more than these?” Peter did love Jesus with all of his heart. He was absolutely sincere. But Peter struggled from his own self-sufficiency, with his own pride. He did love Jesus, but Peter had a lesson to learn. Now, in his brokenness and his humility, he understands that without Jesus, he can do nothing.

There's a bit of a play on words, using two different Greek words for *love*. There are multiple words in the Greek language for love. Two of them are used in the Scripture. *Agape*, which is the highest form of love, and *phileo*, which is also a very high form of love. Probably in our evangelical circles, we have drawn way too big of a distinction between the terms. They're often used interchangeably, but they are not synonyms. They are distinct terms. So, the way this conversation goes is like this: Jesus says, “Simon, son of John, do you agape me?” And Peter says, “Yes, Lord, you know that I phileo you.” “Peter, do you agape me?” “Yes, Lord; you know that I phileo you.” “Peter, do you phileo me?” “Yes, Lord; you know that I phileo you.” Jesus is reminding Peter that three times, around a charcoal fire, he denied Jesus. Now three times, around a charcoal fire, he recommits himself to Jesus.

But what Jesus is saying is, “Peter, do you love Me, do you really love Me? And if you do, get off the bench and get back in the game!” Jesus didn't take Peter off the team; Peter took Peter off the team. He's going back to fishing. He's convinced he's not useful. And what Jesus is saying is, “Peter, if you love Me, then let's get with it. You have a job to do. We have a world to change.” Jesus isn't impressed with Peter spending time in the dark room. He's not impressed with Peter saying, “Oh, I blew it. I'm off the team.” “Peter, do you love Me? If you love Me, then let's get with it. We have a job to do.” It is Peter's recall back to service. Verse 18:

**Truly, 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.” Now 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!”** (Vs. 18-29)

Jesus says to Peter, “Just to be clear, if you're going to follow Me, you will ultimately give up your life for Me.” There's no question the language **stretch out your hands** is imagery of crucifixion. John identifies this is how Peter would die. Jesus is saying to Peter, “Peter, are you in? I just need to tell you, ultimately, if you're in, you will be crucified because of your commitment to Me and the gospel.” But within that, there are words of encouragement, because what Jesus is saying to Peter is, “Peter, if you're in, your witness, your life, your leadership, is going to be so powerful that Nero, the emperor of Rome, will feel it's necessary to take you out. And your life will be so powerful and such a witness for the gospel that your death will bring glory to God!” And He ends it by saying, “**Follow Me!**” “Peter, are you in?” Can you imagine? For thirty years Peter faithfully, courageously, fearlessly, served Jesus, knowing his end, hanging over his head. Verse 20:

**Peter, 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?” So Peter seeing him said to Jesus, “Lord, and what about this man?” Jesus said to him, “If I want him to remain until I come, what *is that* to you? You follow Me!” Therefore 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?”**

**This is the disciple who is testifying to these things and wrote these things, and we know that his testimony is true.** (Vs 20-24)

So, Peter understands what Jesus is saying. He notices John and he says, “Okay, what about this guy?” knowing that John had this especially close personal relationship with Jesus. “*Okay, if I'm going to be crucified, what about that guy?*” To which Jesus responds, “*Peter, that's none of your business. I'm talking to you, ‘Follow Me.’ What I'm saying is, ‘Do you love Me? And, if you love Me, obey Me. And the rest is up to Me. It's not your concern.’*”

John tells us that Jesus' comment created some misunderstanding that John would live until Jesus returned. He's just trying to clarify that. And then he reminds us that he writes as an eyewitness and that **his testimony is true**. Verse 25:

**And 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.**

John tells us there's so much more that could be written about. If you take Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John—you put them all together—we have roughly 50 days in the life of Christ. Out of 33 years, we know what happened on about 50 days!

I want to end our time in the Gospel of John the same way that John ends his Gospel. Jesus says, “Do you love Me...do *you* love Me?” “Well, I've blown it. I've messed up.” Jesus says, “You know that really wasn't My question. My question is, ‘Do you love Me?’ And, if you love Me, then obey Me. We've got a world to change.” God doesn't put people on the bench; people put people on the bench. The only real relevant question is, “Do you love Jesus and, if so, are you willing to obey? Are you willing to accept the call?” You say, “Well, I don't know what the call is.” According to Jesus, that's irrelevant. We choose to follow. The rest is up to Him.

Years ago, when I graduated from seminary—I was at Talbot Seminary in southern California—and when I graduated, my seminary friends were going to San Diego, L.A., Portland, Seattle, and I ended up in Broken Bow, Nebraska, population 3,700. (*laughter*) I had lived in Lincoln; I had lived in Chicago; I had lived in L.A. I had never lived in a place like Broken Bow. And I wondered, “God, what are You doing?” Like, “Was I bad? Am I being punished?” But, honestly, what happened is I had to wrestle with a very important question: “What am I in this for? Am I in this to be somebody? Am I in this to be a big shot? Is my ambition to be some sort of a Christian celebrity? Or am I in this to be obedient? And if God calls me to the Sandhills, isn't that okay? And if God asks me to stay in the Sandhills for the rest of my life, isn't that okay?” I can say with all integrity in my heart, I settled that issue and, if God asked me to stay in the Sandhills until I died, I was fine with that. I actually love that community. Broken Bow is a beautiful community. I love the Sandhills. I love that way of life. I was actually a really good fit there. And the only question was, “God, what do You want from me? I just want to be obedient.”

The truth is, I didn't come knocking on Lincoln Berean's door. You came knocking on my door, and I did believe God called me to Lincoln. I'm now 61 years old, and it's still the same question: “God, what do You want from me? I just want to be obedient. Tell me what You want from me. I just want to be obedient until I draw my last breath, and I want my life to matter.”

But this isn't just about pastors and missionaries. Every person that has trusted Jesus as Savior has an equally high and holy calling. There's no believer that God has put on the bench and disqualified. None! The question He's asking is: “Do you love Me? After all you've learned in the Gospel of John of who I am and what I did for you, that's the question: Do you love Me? And, if you love Me, I'm asking you to obey Me.” Every one of us has a call. Either you're obedient or you're disobedient. But I can guarantee you, God hasn't called anyone to be a bench-sitter.

Whenever we talk about accepting a call, I can't help but think of our brothers and sisters in India. These are some of the most faithful, courageous, admirable Christians I have ever known. When they accept the call, they understand it is highly likely this will mean persecution and for some of them, death. But they do it. They do it courageously, faithfully, and joyfully.

There is a familiar hymn that actually came out of northern India somewhere between a hundred and a hundred and fifty years ago. It's very difficult to find out the exact origin of this hymn, other than

we know with confidence it came out of northern India in a time of great persecution. And it became the proclamation, the declaration, of the believers in India as, together, they declared those familiar words: “I have decided to follow Jesus. No turning back. No turning back.” Again, and again and again, that song became their anthem, some of them, to their death.

I would like to end our time in the Gospel of John with that great hymn. But here's how I'd like to do it. We're going to sing it together a cappella. I want us to hear one another. I'm going to ask, on the first verse, that we remain seated. I want you to think about the words. I want you to think about what you're committing to. I want us to take this as seriously as if we lived in India. I don't know what the cost will be to make the decision to follow Jesus. What I'm asking is: “Are you willing to pay the cost?” Jesus says, “Do you love Me? If you love Me, obey Me.” Jesus is calling us together to be a church to change the world. So, on the first verse, I just want you to think about what Jesus is asking. On verses two and three, if you're ready to say, “I have decided to follow Jesus, no turning back; whatever the cost, I'm in.” If you're willing to say that, I invite you to stand to your feet as this becomes our anthem as we follow Jesus. Don't stand if you don't mean it. Don't stand because the person next to you is standing. At the beginning of the second verse, I'm going to invite you to join me, because I am telling you, “Whatever the cost, I have decided to follow Jesus! I'm in!”

*I have decided to follow Jesus;  
I have decided to follow Jesus;  
I have decided to follow Jesus;  
No turning back; no turning back.*

*The cross before me, the world behind me;  
The cross before me, the world behind me;  
The cross before me, the world behind me;  
No turning back; no turning back.*

*Though none go with me, still I will follow;  
Though none go with me, still I will follow;  
Though none go with me, still I will follow;  
No turning back, no turning back.*

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## Introduction

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Although the fall Life Group session ended last week, our question writing team really wanted to finish this last chapter of John. That's because all stories need a fitting conclusion to bring closure and clarity, and John's last chapter does more than just wrap up loose ends. John 21 continues to bring us the hope we have in Jesus.

## Study Questions

- 1) In verses 1-5, the disciples fish all night, some of them are professional fishermen yet they are unable to catch a single fish.
  - a. **How defeated do you think Peter felt?**
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  - b. **Have you experienced those periods in your life?**
  
- 2) The scene we see in v 6-7 is very similar to the one we see earlier in the gospel story, but there are some striking differences.  
Read Luke 5:4-10
  - a. **In what ways are Peter's reactions different?**
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  - b. **What has Peter seen Jesus do or heard Him say that might explain this different reaction?**

- 3) In verses 15-19, Jesus calls Peter to be a Shepherd, and He tells Peter it's a calling that will eventually lead to his death. Peter's ability to live on mission seems to be rooted in Jesus's simple question, "Do you love me?"

Read Luke 7:41-48

- a. Peter had denied Jesus, and yet here Jesus is. **What do you think Jesus was trying to teach Peter by asking him the same question three times?**
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
- b. **Is failure final? Why or why not?**
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
- c. Sometimes, it can be easy to beat ourselves up for past mistakes. **How does loving Jesus and trusting his forgiveness help you put past mistakes into perspective?**

- 4) In verses 18-24, Jesus tells Peter the type of death he would receive. Immediately, he turns to John and asks Jesus, "What about him?"

- a. It's hard not to compare ourselves to others. **In what areas do you often find yourself comparing (finances, skills, appearance, opportunity, etc.)?**
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
- b. **Is Jesus being unfair if our story is different from someone else's story?**
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
- c. In John 14:15 Jesus said, "If you love me, keep my commands." Now in Chapter 21 Jesus implores, "Follow me!" **Are you ready to respond to that calling?**