

Feed My Sheep (John 21)

Expository Lessons from the Gospel of John

I. Background and Recap of Preceding Events from Gospel of John

- a. Jesus has been raised from the dead on the third day, in fulfillment of prophecy; and just as He promised.
- b. He has appeared to the apostles, showing Himself to Thomas last, and He has provided convincing evidence to them that He has been bodily resurrected (physical proof that this is not a ghost, not a hallucination and not another person).
- c. The gospel of **John** closes with Jesus appearing to His disciples in Galilee and giving specific instructions to the apostle Peter.
- d. Note that the last chapter of the gospel of **John** is unlike that of the other three gospels.
 - i. The other three gospels, in their final chapters, emphasize the next step of the mission: *evangelizing the world*.
 1. Last chapter of **Matthew** focuses on evangelism of the world, with the Great Commission.
 - a. (Jesus said) “Go therefore and *make disciples of all the nations*, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,” (**Matthew 28:19**, NKJV)
 2. Similarly, last chapter of **Mark** also closes with strong focus on evangelism of the world.
 - a. (And Jesus said to them) “*Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature.*” (**Mark 16:15**, NKJV)
 3. The gospel of **Luke** closes with Jesus telling the apostles to wait in Jerusalem, and that the gospel will go out to all nations from there.
 - a. “...repentance and remission of sins should be *preached in His name to all nations*, beginning at Jerusalem.” (**Luke 24:47**, NKJV)

- b. The message goes out into Jerusalem starting at Pentecost in **Acts 2**, and is spread throughout the world from there, as the story continues in the rest of the book of **Acts**.
- 4. The last chapter of John, we will see, has a different emphasis.
 - a. However, in **John 20** (from the prior lesson) it did close with a statement establishing the evangelistic purpose of spreading the gospel to unbelievers.
 - b. “And truly Jesus did many other signs in the presence of His disciples, which are not written in this book; but *these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name.*” (**John 20:30–31**, NKJV)

II. Jesus Appears Again to the Eleven, Now in Galilee

- a. Read **John 21:1-14**.
- b. Summary of the events.
 - i. The apostles return to Galilee.
 - ii. Peter decides to go fishing in the Sea of Tiberias (also known as the Sea of Galilee, from **John 6:1**), and is joined by several other disciples.
 - iii. They fish all night (with nets) but catch nothing.
 - iv. In the morning, Jesus is standing on the shore, while the apostles are still in the boat. They do not recognize Jesus.
 - v. Jesus asks them if they have caught anything. When they reply “No.”, He advises that they cast the net on the right side of the boat.
 - vi. They do so; and are overwhelmed with the heavy catch: 153 fish.
 - vii. “The disciple whom Jesus loved” cries out that the stranger on the shore is “the Lord”.
 - 1. John’s comment in **John 21:24** suggests that John, the author of this gospel, is the person referred to as “the disciple whom Jesus loved”.
 - 2. Several early Christian writers state their belief that references like this, to “the disciple whom Jesus loved” in this chapter and elsewhere in this gospel refer to the *apostle John*.

- a. Irenaeus, bishop of the church in Lyons (located in modern-day France), writing c. 180 AD:
 - i. “Afterwards, John, the disciple of the Lord, who also had leaned upon His breast, did himself publish a gospel during his residence at Ephesus in Asia.”
 - ii. (Source: Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, book 3, chapter 1; found in Ante-Nicene Fathers, vol. 1, p. 414)
- b. Tertullian, an early Christian writer from Carthage, North Africa, writing c. 197 AD:
 - i. “Was anything, again, concealed from John, the Lord’s most beloved disciple, who used to lean on His breast to whom alone the Lord pointed Judas out as the traitor, whom He commended to Mary as a son in His own stead?”
 - ii. (Source: Tertullian, *The Prescription Against Heretics*, chapter 22; found in Ante-Nicene Fathers vol. 3, p. 253)
- c. Origen, a Christian teacher in the church of Alexandria, Egypt, writing c. 228 AD:
 - i. “What are we to say of him who leaned on Jesus’ breast, namely, John, who left one gospel, though confessing that he could make so many that the world would not contain them?”
 - ii. (Source: Origen, *Commentary on the Gospel of John*, book 5, chapter 3; found in Ante-Nicene Fathers vol. 9, p. 346)
- d. John Chrysostom (c. 349-407 AD), preacher and bishop of the church in Constantinople, in his *Homily 88 on the Gospel of John*, similarly identifies “the disciple whom Jesus loved” as the apostle John.
- viii. Peter pulls on his outer garment, plunges into the sea and swims to the shore. The other disciples follow in the boat, dragging the net with the catch of fish.
- ix. Jesus is found by a fire of coals, with fish and bread on it.

- x. Jesus invites them to bring the fish they have just caught; Peter drags the net to land.
- xi. Jesus invites the disciples to join in breakfast.
- xii. This is the third time Jesus appeared to the disciples after being raised from the dead.
 - 1. The first time: to 10 of the apostles (without Thomas);
 - 2. The second time; to 11 apostles (including Thomas); and
 - 3. The third time: this event.
- c. I have no idea why the detail about 153 fish being caught is mentioned. I am not aware of any special significance of that number in Scripture.
- d. Jesus calls his disciples “children”.
 - i. Clement of Alexandria in *The Instructor*, ANF v. 2, p. 212
 - 1. The title of the work is *The Instructor* (the Greek word is the same as our word “*pedagogue*”, which literally means *one who is leading children*).
 - 2. In this work, Clement describes Jesus as “The Instructor”, who is teaching us, as children.
 - 3. Clement makes the point that Jesus calls his disciples “children” (or in similar diminutive manner, as lambs or chicks) to emphasize the innocence and simplicity of his disciples.
 - 4. The Christian faith is simple, easy enough for a child to understand. You do not need to be a scholar.
 - ii. Other passages where Jesus uses similar terminology toward his disciples include:
 - 1. “...Assuredly, I say to you, unless you are converted and *become as little children*, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven.” (**Matthew 18:3**, NKJV)
 - 2. “And the disciples were astonished at His words. But Jesus answered again and said to them, ‘*Children*, how hard it is for those who trust in riches to enter the kingdom of God!’” (**Mark 10:24**, NKJV)

3. *"Little children, I shall be with you a little while longer. You will seek Me; and as I said to the Jews, 'Where I am going, you cannot come,' so now I say to you."* (**John 13:33**, NKJV)
 4. *"O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the one who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing!"* (**Matthew 23:37**, NKJV)
- e. Peter's unique response when recognizing that it is Jesus on the shore.
- i. I had a Roman Catholic upbringing, and don't recall hearing derogatory things said about Peter. Peter is held in very high regard in the Catholic church!
 - ii. However, I found out later that there is a tendency in much of the Christian world (especially among Protestants) to criticize and look down on the apostle Peter. Some of the reasons I have heard over the years for criticizing Peter include:
 1. He famously denied knowing Jesus three times, on the night He was betrayed.
 2. He was rebuked by Paul, in the account in **Galatians 2**
 3. When Jesus tries to contradict Jesus regarding His statement that he must suffer and die in Jerusalem, Jesus rebukes him sharply.
 - a. *"From that time Jesus began to show to His disciples that He must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and be raised the third day. Then Peter took Him aside and began to rebuke Him, saying, 'Far be it from You, Lord; this shall not happen to You!' But He turned and said to Peter, 'Get behind Me, Satan! You are an offense to Me, for you are not mindful of the things of God, but the things of men.'"* (**Matthew 16:21-23**, NKJV)
 4. Peter faltered when walking on the water, in **Matthew 14**, when he saw the wind; and was rebuked by Jesus for his lack of faith.
 5. Peter is compared to Paul in terms of missionary work (claiming that Paul was a much greater missionary than Peter).
 - a. We know a lot more about Paul's travels than Peter's, due to Paul's more extensive writings; also because the

book of **Acts** was written by Luke, a travelling companion of Paul.

6. Roman Catholics have connected Peter with their papacy (bishop of Rome, commonly referred to as “the pope”, claimed as earthly head of the church world-wide). Protestants have, in reaction, tended to denigrate Peter and elevate Paul.
 - a. For those unfamiliar with this claim of the Roman Catholic Church, their logic runs as follows:
 - i. In Jesus’ statement in **Matthew 16:18** about giving the keys to the kingdom, Jesus was handing off leadership of His church to the apostle Peter. Therefore, Peter was appointed head of the church by Jesus.
 - ii. Peter ended up in Rome; and became bishop of the church there (not mentioned in Scripture, but there is some other historical evidence to support this claim).
 - iii. After Peter died, the office of head of the worldwide church was passed on to the successive bishops in Rome; and that succession of authority has carried forward over the centuries to our own time.
 1. Of course, there is nothing in Scripture to support this last point, regarding future bishops in Rome to be over the entire church worldwide!
 - iii. On the other hand, there are many *positive* things about Peter from the Scriptures, including:
 1. Peter is mentioned first when the apostles are listed in the gospels (**Matthew 10**, **Mark 3** and **Luke 6**).
 2. He was the only one in the boat who was willing to walk on the water to Jesus.
 3. Jesus did say to Peter “on this rock I will build my church” (Matthew 16:18). Whether this applied to Peter himself or to Peter’s faith or confession of faith (that Jesus was the Christ), Jesus highlights him in some manner in that statement.
 4. He was one of the three at the Mount of Transfiguration.

5. Peter seems to have had a leading role at the beginning of the church, as a “first among equals”. He is the main speaker on the Day of Pentecost. In **Acts 2:37** and **Acts 5:29** it speaks of “Peter and the other apostles”.
6. In **John 21**, Peter is the one who dove out of the boat and swam to shore, 200 cubits (about 300 feet or 100 meters). In his enthusiasm, he could not wait for the boat to be rowed to shore!
- iv. Let us appreciate Peter as a great hero of the faith. We do not have to criticize him just because another religious group (the Roman Catholic church) has misappropriated his role in church history.

III. Jesus Questions Peter

- a. Read **John 21:15-19**.
- b. Jesus asks Peter three times, “Do you love me more than *these*?”
 - i. **Question:** Does “*these*” refer to people or the things around them (boats, nets, etc.)?
 1. Seems to me (my personal opinion, based on how I see context of the statement) that Jesus could be referring to the nets, boats, etc. of Peter’s old life fishing on the Sea of Galilee.
- c. Many times, I have heard preachers claim that *if you know the Greek* (and of course most of their listeners don’t), one can see something in this passage that is not evident in the standard *English language* translations. Let’s see about that!
- d. Jesus asks the same question three times of Peter.
 - i. The first two times where Jesus says, “Do you love me?” the word translated “love” is the Greek verb ἀγαπάω. The noun form that more people are familiar with is “*agape*”.
 - ii. When Peter responds, “You know that I love you”, the Greek word translated as “love” in Peter’s response is φιλέω (phileo), instead of “*agape*”.
 - iii. The last third and final Jesus asks the question “Do you love me”, Jesus uses the word “phileo” (unlike the first two times when He asked Peter this question).
- e. I have heard many preachers claim that there is great significance in the Greek word choice here. They claim that while English has one rather

unspecific word “love”, there are several Greek words that correspond to more narrow, specific types of love.

- i. They make the claim that the “agape-type” of love refers to a very special, divine, self-sacrificial type of love (for example, as God *loved* the world); while
 - ii. They further state that in distinct contrast, “phileo-type” of love is a lower or more common type of love, that would correspond to:
 1. a *brotherly* type of love, or
 2. a *fondness* for someone or toward something.
 - iii. Therefore, they claim that Jesus is asking first two times *whether Peter has this special self-sacrificial love*; and Peter is responding evasively by answering, essentially, “Yes, I *like* you”. Then (it is further claimed) Jesus finally asks the third time, “Do you *even like* me?”
- f. This all *sounds* good; and is often repeated in sermons; *but isn’t it true!*
- i. The two terms “agape” and “phileo” are used almost interchangeably throughout Scripture. *Agape* is a common Greek word found throughout the Septuagint (abbreviated LXX, the Greek version of the Old Testament quoted by Jesus and the apostles and used by the early church) as well as in the Greek New Testament. If you look at how it is used throughout the Scriptures, it becomes apparent that “agape” is a term that has essentially the same broad range of meanings as our own English word “love”.
 1. One example, which illustrates how Peter himself understood and used the term *agape*: “They have forsaken the right way and gone astray, following the way of Balaam the son of Beor, who *loved* the wages of unrighteousness;” (**2 Peter 2:15**, NKJV)
 - a. Peter uses the word “agape” there, referring to Balaam’s *love* for money in payment for doing wicked things. Clearly, to Peter this term was not reserved for a special sacrificial, spiritual love!
 - b. Balaam was willing to do evil for cash (whether cursing the Jews or leading them into sexual immorality) because of his corrupt heart, which *loved* (agape) money.
 2. Another example: in the passage where says that Absalom “loved” his sister Tamar, and then violated her.

- a. The word for “love” there in the LXX is *agape*! (See **2 Samuel 13:1-16**, designated **2 Kingdoms 13:1-16** in the LXX.)
- 3. We explored debunking this popular agape/phileo myth further in an earlier lesson in this expository series on the gospel of John: “*As I Have Loved You*” (which covered **John 13:31-38**).
- ii. Furthermore, I am not aware of any of the early Christian writers (who spoke Koine Greek), making this agape/phileo distinction in the text in **John 21**. *This claimed distinction appears to be limited to modern preachers and commentators.*
- g. **Question:** *What are we to learn from this interaction between Jesus and Peter?*
 - i. **My answer:** Jesus was deeply concerned about someone caring for the sheep He was about to leave behind.
 - ii. This reminds me of something Jesus had said earlier.
 - 1. “But when He saw the multitudes, He was moved with compassion for them, because they were weary and scattered, like sheep having no shepherd.” (**Matthew 9:36**, NKJV)
 - iii. It also reminds me of the concern that Moses expressed, before he died.
 - 1. Read **Numbers 27:12-17**.
 - 2. Moses, when told he was about to die on Mount Nebo, expressed concern for the sheep who would be left behind. He had been leading them for the past 40 years, and wanted to make sure that the Lord would appoint another shepherd to lead and watch over the Lord’s people, after his departure.
 - 3. Moses truly had the heart of a good shepherd.
 - 4. If I knew that I was about to die and was confident that I was personally prepared spiritually to meet death, my top concern would be for those left behind (wife, children, grandchildren and spiritual family).
 - a. I assume that other Christian men also would have the same concern as Moses, under similar circumstances.

- iv. Jesus was the Good Shepherd, and was concerned that after His departure, that the sheep would be taken care of. This is a very inspiring and challenging passage to me, personally.

1. Read **Ezekiel 34:1-16** and **34:20-24**

- a. God here explains how He feels about all the bad spiritual leaders who are abusing His people. God's *heart is broken!*
- b. God also reveals what the heart of a good shepherd looks like, and what someone with that heart will do.
- c. The Lord also reveals that in the future, He will send *one* Good Shepherd, referred to as 'David'.
 - i. Of course this was written hundreds of years after the death of King David, so had to apply to the promised descendant of David, one who would come from his body (**2 Samuel 7**).

2. Jesus was *the* Good Shepherd, as He revealed in **John 10**.

3. He had the heart of a good shepherd: concerned for His sheep, to the end.

- v. Peter also carried that concern forward, to others.

1. Read **1 Peter 5:1-4**

- a. Elders called to be good shepherds for the younger ones in the flock.
- b. Serve voluntarily.
- c. Lead by example first and foremost. Don't lord it over others. Spiritual leaders in the church should not be "lording it over" others, nor bossing them around.
- d. When Jesus, the Chief Shepherd returns, He will reward them with an everlasting crown.

2. What will a good shepherd in the church do?

- a. Make sure the sheep are given good food and water (a healthy spiritual/Biblical diet).
- b. Keep them safe from the wolves and predators (false teachers).

- h. How Peter would glorify God, in death.
 - i. Jesus speaks of when Peter was younger, and also what will happen when he is older (so obviously Peter is middle-aged at this time).
 - ii. Good news: Peter would live to be an old man.
 - iii. The bad news: In his old age, someone would lead Peter where he did not want to go; and would *stretch out his hands*.
 - 1. This expression reminds me of how Jesus Himself died, with His hands stretched being stretched out on the cross.
 - 2. To me, this suggests that Peter would die by crucifixion, as an old man.
- i. How did the apostle Peter die? What do we know from historical accounts?
 - i. From Eusebius (bishop of the church in Caesarea, and Christian historian), writing c. 325 AD:
 - 1. "Thus Nero publicly announcing himself as the chief enemy of God, was led on in his fury to slaughter the apostles. Paul is therefore said to have been beheaded at Rome, and *Peter to have been crucified under him*. And this account is confirmed by the fact, that the names of Peter and Paul still remain in the cemeteries of that city even to this day.
 - 2. "...And that both suffered martyrdom about the same cut time, *Dionysius, bishop of Corinth bears the following testimony*, in his discourse addressed to the Romans: 'Thus, likewise you, by means of this admonition, have mingled the flourishing seed that had been planted by Peter and Paul at Rome and Corinth. For both of these having planted us at Corinth, likewise instructed us; and having in like manner taught in Italy, they suffered martyrdom about the same time.' This testimony I have superadded, in order that the truth of the history might be still more confirmed."
 - 3. (Source: Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, book 2, chapter 25)
 - ii. An account of Peter's martyrdom is also provided in *Martyr's Mirror*, a classic in the Anabaptist world first published in the Netherlands in the 1660 (this account is pieced together from earlier historical records available to the compiler, which are cited in that work):
 - 1. "Finally there was fulfilled, according to the testimony of history, the prediction of Christ, that he (Peter) should glorify

God by his death; for while he was at Rome, he was sentenced by the Emperor Nero to be crucified. But, esteeming himself unworthy to be crucified with his head upward like his Savior, he requested to be *crucified with his head downward*; which he easily obtained, for the tyrants were forthwith willing and ready to increase his pain.

2. "This occurred, as is stated, after Peter had preached the gospel for thirty-seven years, and *when he was seventy years old*."
 3. (Source: Van Braght, Thieleman, *Martyr's Mirror*, article on Simon Peter, p. 81)
- iii. Clement of Alexandria, a teacher in the church in Alexandria, Egypt, writing c. 195 AD, wrote regarding the martyrdom of Peter:
1. "They say, accordingly, that the blessed Peter, on seeing his wife led to death, rejoiced on account of her call and conveyance home, and called very encouragingly and comfortingly, addressing her by name, 'Remember the Lord!' Such was the marriage of the blessed, and their perfect disposition towards those dearest to them."
 2. (Source: Clement of Alexandria, *The Stromata, or Miscellanies*, book 7, chapter 11; found in Ante-Nicene Fathers vol. 2, p. 541)
- iv. Tertullian, a Christian writer from North Africa, writing c. 231:
1. We read the lives of the Caesars: At Rome Nero was the first who stained with blood the rising faith. *Then is Peter girt by another, when he is made fast to the cross.*"
 2. (Source: Tertullian, *Scorpiace, or Antidote to the Scorpion's Sting*, chapter 15; found in Ante-Nicene Fathers vol. 3, p. 648)
- v. As indicated above, there is a lot of historical evidence to point to Peter dying a martyr's death by crucifixion in Rome, as an old man (whether upside down or otherwise), just as Jesus foretold in **John 21:18-19**.
1. For more information from early Christian writings on the life and death of the apostle Peter, see *Dictionary of Early Christian Beliefs*, ed. David Bercot, article on 'Peter'.

IV. What of John?

- a. Read **John 21:20-25**.

- b. After Jesus explains the fate Peter should expect (martyrdom as an old man), he asks Jesus a very natural question: “But what about him?” (referring to “the beloved disciple” the apostle John).
 - i. Jesus declined to answer Peter’s question, essentially telling Peter that the fate of John *is none of his concern*.
 - ii. Apparently, there was a (false) rumor circulating among the Christians based on this statement by Jesus, that John would not die. In other words, Jesus would return while John was still alive.
 - iii. John, the writer, uses this opportunity to dispel this rumor. He clarifies that Jesus did NOT say that John would not die; Jesus merely said, “What is that to you?”
- c. Tertullian (writing c. 210 AD) commented on this rumor as well, in the context of making a point that all people were destined to die. Tertullian made the point that even Enoch and Elijah, who were taken up (and had not yet died) would in fact return to earth and die before the end (consider **Revelation 11:1-10**). Then Tertullian continues:
 - i. “*Even John underwent death, although concerning him there had prevailed an ungrounded expectation that he would remain alive until the coming of the Lord.*”
 - ii. (Source: Tertullian, *A Treatise on the Soul*, chapter 50; found in Ante-Nicene Fathers vol. 3, p. 228)
- d. Jesus’ admonition to Peter also reminds me of something that my parents often told me, when I complained about how my younger brother or sisters were being (*unfairly, it seemed to me*) favorably treated.
 - i. They often told me, “Mind your own business!”
 - ii. Many years later I discovered that this was based on a Biblical command. Paul admonished the Christians in Thessalonica:
 - 1. “...that you also aspire to lead a quiet life, to mind your own business, and to work with your own hands, as we commanded you,” (**1 Thessalonians 4:11**, NKJV)
 - iii. The truth is, as Jesus and Paul tell us, we don’t need to waste our time being busybodies and worrying about how others being treated better than we are.
 - 1. We just need to do our own job, and to mind *our own* business. That will keep us very busy in this life!

- e. John closes with a literary flourish “if all the things Jesus did were written...I suppose that even the world itself could not contain the books that would be written”.
 - i. John has finished the job he set out to do: to provide future generations of Christians with important details regarding the life, miracles, teaching and ministry of Jesus.
 - ii. As we discussed at the beginning of this series, early Christian historical accounts tell us that John wrote his gospel last, after the other three gospels were in circulation. (See Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, book 3, chapter 24.) Therefore, John focused largely on details not contained in the other three, for our benefit.
 - iii. As he told us at the end of **John chapter 20**, the things John chose to include in this gospel were focused on bringing us to faith in Jesus, that He is the Christ, the Son of God. And that in believing, that we might have eternal life.
 - 1. “And truly Jesus did many other signs in the presence of His disciples, which are not written in this book; but *these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God*, and that believing you may have life in His name.” (**John 20:30–31**, NKJV)

V. Some Take-Aways from This Lesson

- a. As Jesus told Peter, we need to mind our own business and not be preoccupied with comparing ourselves to others (and how they may appear to be getting better treatment than we are).
- b. Like Jesus (and Peter), let us always have the heart of a good shepherd. This especially applies to the older members of the church, the older men, and those younger *who will become older* one day.
 - i. Always look out for the sheep.
 - ii. Make sure they are being taken care of (good food and water, binding up the wounded, protecting them from the wolves, and preparing the strong for service).