

JOHN 21

JESUS, THE RESTORER OF THE REPENTANT

This charming scene, in which the risen Christ meets His disciples by the Sea of Tiberias, may be regarded as an Epilogue to the Gospel. Nevertheless, it is vitally related to the great truths of the Book, and it is in perfect harmony with its contents. At the end of the last chapter, John had completed his main objective in penning this Book; but by this final chapter, his message is enforced and enlarged, and an artistic literary completeness is given to his work. Here we find a symbolic “sign” and a specific prophecy, which attest the Divine Nature of the Lord Jesus Christ; here also, the essence of faith is set forth as loving obedience, and life is interpreted in terms of service.

At the bidding of their Master, the disciples had returned to Galilee, where He had promised that they would see Him. But while they waited for Him to appear, seven of the men returned to their former occupation as fishermen. After a long night of unsuccessful labor, in the early dawn, they saw Jesus standing upon the shore; but they did not recognize Him. At His suggestion, they let down their net again and were surprised by a miraculous catch of fish! John immediately discerned the presence and act of the Divine Lord; Peter hastened to swim ashore, in his eagerness to greet the Master; and the others followed in the boat. And “when they got out upon the land, they see a fire of coals there, and fish laid thereon, and bread ... And none of the disciples durst inquire of him, Who art thou? knowing that it was the Lord.” By this unexpected appearance, as well as by each similar manifestation of Himself after His resurrection, Jesus was making it more easy for His disciples to understand what He had told them of a time that was soon to come, when – by His Spirit – He would be with them continually. The first message of this chapter, therefore, is the assurance of the Personal presence of Christ with all His people. Sometimes, after long hours of lonely toil or in the dark night of weariness, we remember the Savior’s promise, recognize His presence, and find peace and gladness and hope as we greet the dawn of a brighter day. However, the essential message of this closing scene of John’s Gospel relates to Christian service.

The “sign” of the miraculous catch of fishes (verses 1-14) is not to be confused with a similar miracle that was wrought by our Lord at the opening of His ministry (Luke 5), but it ought to be interpreted in the light of that previous event. On that former occasion, Jesus clearly stated the truth which He wished to illustrate: “Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men.” And now it required no word of explanation to impress upon His disciples the truth that He

Outline of the chapter:

- ❖ *Jesus appears to His disciples on the shore of the Sea of Tiberias – verses 1-14*
- ❖ *He has a special dialogue with Peter – verses 15-19*
- ❖ *He makes a declaration concerning John – verses 20-23*
- ❖ *The conclusion of John’s Gospel-narrative – verses 24-25*

had called them to undertake, for Him, the work of “saving men alive.” This was to be the chief characteristic of their service. In this task of winning souls for Christ, every Christian is concerned! Opportunities and talents differ from person to person, but it is the privilege and duty of all to be “fishers of men.”

The miraculous catch of fishes also suggests the guidance which the Master is always ready to give, and upon which we must depend, if our service is to be successful. These men toiled all the night and caught nothing; but Jesus “said unto them, Cast the net on the right side of the boat, and ye shall find. They cast therefore, and now they were not able to draw it for the multitude of fishes!” How often we stand in need of some directing word from our Master!

Furthermore, we are here taught that we can depend upon the power of our Lord in doing His work. This miracle is not to be explained merely on the grounds that Jesus knew the best place to fish, for we know that all things are subject to Him – including, as the Psalmist says, “the fish of the sea, whatsoever passeth through the paths of the seas.” As we undertake the service of the Master, we should be encouraged by the remembrance that He has all power “in heaven and on earth.”

Then again, this narrative tells us of the support which the Master gives His servants. We can not only depend upon His power to do the work, but also upon His grace to give what we are needing for the body and the soul. When the disciples come to land, they find the broiled fish and the bread ready for their morning meal; and to this provision, they are told to add from the abundant supply which they had just caught in their net. The net is described as containing “a hundred and fifty and three” great fish; and so the Lord made provision for His disciples’ future needs, as well as for the present. As servants of Christ, we truly receive “of his fulness,” and “grace for grace!” (chapter 1:16)

As we are standing on the eastern shore of the Sea of Tiberias, the morning breeze blows fresh in our faces. The tiny wavelets run up with a silvery ripple and die on the white sand; across the expanse of water, the white buildings of Tiberias and Capernaum gleam forth. The fishing boat is pulled up on the shore; near it lay the unbroken nets, although they had been heavy with fish; and yonder are the remnants of the fishermen’s breakfast and the dying embers of a fire – beside which, the Lord Jesus and Peter are engaged in conversation. And in this dialogue, we find further instructions as to the nature of service in the cause of Christ. Here the Master gives the Apostle a threefold commission to feed His sheep. It is necessary to “save men alive” by throwing out the Gospel-net and bringing them to Christ in living faith; but it is also necessary to guide believers in the way of truth, to shepherd them with pastoral care, and to feed them with the Word of life! This work is assigned in a very special measure to some whom the Lord calls to be pastors and elders; but in reality, there is not one Christian who does *not* have a responsibility, to some degree, in this blessed ministry.

The more specific message that is given in connection with this commission of Peter is for all believers. It does not relate so much to the *form* of Christian service as to its *motive* – which ought to be love for the Lord Jesus. Not too long before this, Peter had denied his Master and forfeited his place as an Apostle. Jesus, after His resurrection, had met with Peter alone; and undoubtedly, He had given pardon to the repentant disciple. Now, however, He publicly reinstates him to his former privileged position; but before doing so, he draws from Peter a declaration of his devoted love. Three questions are asked, three replies are given, and each is followed by the welcome command to public Apostolic service. Surely Jesus is calling to mind the threefold denial of Peter, and the proud boast of surpassing love which had preceded that denial. “Simon, son of Jonas, lovest thou me more than these?” the Master asks – referring to Peter’s self-confident promise to follow Him, even though all the other Apostles should fail Him. In his reply, Peter does affirm his love; but – being humbled by the memory of his fall – he uses a less emphatic Greek word than that which his Master had just used: “Yea, Lord; thou knowest that I love thee.” The word that he uses does not indicate a perfect, complete devotion; he feels that his denial disproves such love – even though, as he looks into his own heart, he cannot deny a supreme admiration and a true affection for his Lord. And Jesus then says to him, “Feed my lambs.”



But the conversation is not over. Jesus now alters His question; He omits the phrase which had rebuked the former boast of Peter and simply asks, “Lovest thou me?” Peter replies as before, using a humbler term for love than the Master used; and again, appealing to the Master’s own knowledge of his heart, he affirms his affection: “Yea, Lord; thou knowest that I love thee.” Jesus says to him again, “Feed my sheep.”

For the third time, Jesus changes the form of His question. This time, He uses the term for love that Peter had used; He seems to ask whether Peter really even had the humble and imperfect devotion that he was claiming. Now Peter is deeply grieved – not only by the repetition of the question, but also by this change in its form. However, he cannot deny his own consciousness that he loves the Master, even though he had previously denied Him. He cannot help affirming that love; and now he appeals for confirmation to the innermost, Divine knowledge of Christ – which he emphasizes by an added phrase: “Lord, thou knowest all things; thou knowest that I love thee!” Yes, the Lord does know! And for this reason, He repeats His inspiring commission for the third time: “Feed my sheep.”

We, too, may have denied our Master by word or deed. But if we have truly repented, and if there is a sincere love for Christ in our hearts, we need not

hesitate – in humble dependence upon Him – to publicly enter service in His cause again!

In the case of Peter, and in the experience of all the servants of Christ, there will be opportunities of expressing love more forcibly than by the utterance of words – no matter how carefully they may be selected. Suffering is usually the accompaniment of service and the test of love. Peter would later prove his devotion to Christ by a martyr's death; and of this fact, he is now tenderly informed by his Master – Who then bids him to follow Him. But as he looks behind him, Peter sees his dear friend John following them; and so he immediately asks Jesus what John's experience was to be. The Savior replies: "If I will that he tarry till I come, what is that to thee? follow thou me." Of course, Jesus was not suggesting that we should not take a deep interest in the lives of others. But He wishes us to be kept from all envy and discontentment which comparisons among ourselves tend to produce, and He desires us to be more concerned with our absolute faithfulness to Him. Here He is suggesting a particular lesson that we would do well to learn as we engage in His service. The allotted season is brief, and the pangs of death are severe; but the heavenly rest is near at hand! In the meantime, however, there are long years of testimony, and of waiting for the Lord's return. When Christ comes back in the fullness of His glory, the dead shall be raised, and living believers shall be transformed – and together, we shall "ever be with the Lord." This has been the blessed hope of every generation of Christians; and it should encourage us to such faithfulness in the Master's service that we may always pray, "Come, Lord Jesus!"

A few brief words (verses 24-25) form the conclusion of this Epilogue, as well as the conclusion of John's Gospel. Here we find an affirmation of the truthfulness and credibility of John as a witness to the facts which his narrative relates. The more carefully one reads this remarkable Book, the more ardently will he or she assent to this testimony! The author must have been not only an eyewitness, and a man of the most profound spiritual vision; but he must have also been one who, in a special measure, received the aid of the Holy Spirit Who was promised to guide the disciples of Christ into all truth. The last verse, in a beautiful hyperbole, asserts that "there are also many other things which Jesus did, the which if they should be written every one, I suppose that even the world itself would not contain the books that should be written!" No writings, however true, can ever comprehend the infinite glory that is manifested by the Divine Son of God. Of that glory, this Gospel gives us a glimpse; but it is such a satisfying, splendid, and alluring glimpse that we love to linger in its light – and we earnestly long for that clearer vision when we shall meet our Savior face to face, and when we "shall be like him" when we "see him even as he is!"

Lord, plant the seed of love for You in our hearts, which will then flow out in love for mankind as well. Equip us for the great work of feeding Your sheep that You have called us to do – even if it is simply the shepherding of our own families! Amen.