

John 21:20-25

Introduction

Two weeks ago, we saw how after restoring Peter and bestowing upon him the sacred trust of shepherding His sheep, Jesus foretold Peter's final triumph.

- John 21:18–19 — “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!”

Those words, “*And when He had spoken this*,” emphasize the fact that what Jesus says next (“follow Me”) is rooted in what he's just been saying. It's on the basis of this assurance of Peter's final triumph that Jesus now calls Peter to follow Him. On the other hand, it's Jesus' call to follow Him that explains how Peter's final triumph is to be achieved. “Follow Me” on the path that I have walked, the path that I Myself have pioneered, the path that leads now through suffering and death to resurrection life and glory.

But there may also have been a double sense in these words. We can picture Jesus saying to Peter, “Follow Me,” even as he gets up and motions to Peter to follow Him—or to come along with Him—for a private walk along the beach. In this case the words, “And when [Jesus] had spoken this,” will also be signaling the end of Jesus' words to Peter around the fire and in the presence of all the disciples and the beginning of a private conversation between Jesus and Peter as they walk alone, along the beach. When we come to verse 20, this is exactly what we see: Peter and Jesus walking together. Only they're not actually alone.

I. John 21:20 — Peter, turning around, saw the disciple whom Jesus loved following them; the one who also had leaned back upon His bosom [*stethos*] at the supper and said, “Lord, who is the one who betrays You?”

Who is this disciple “whom Jesus loved?” He's the one writing these very words (v. 24). Back when we first began this series, we saw why he must, in fact, be the Apostle John himself. Though this was never a secret, we can't ignore the reality that in a gospel where more of the disciples are mentioned by name more times than in any of the other Gospels, John is not mentioned by name even once. We know the Apostle John wrote this gospel, but this is the very reason we must be so impressed with the fact that he chooses, from start to finish, to remain nameless.¹

Nameless, but not absent. In chapter nineteen, we saw “the disciple whom Jesus loved” standing nearby when Jesus was crucified, and then we saw Jesus entrusting His mother, to the care of this disciple (19:26-27). In chapter twenty, we saw Peter and “the other disciple whom Jesus loved” running to the empty tomb and going inside the empty tomb on that first day of the week. The disciple whom Jesus loved then “saw and believed” (20:1-8). Earlier in this chapter, when

¹ This is what necessitated, essentially, that John's brother James remain nameless as well.

Jesus called to the disciples from the beach and provided the miraculous catch of fish, we heard “that disciple whom Jesus loved” saying to Peter, “It is the Lord,” (21:4-7). We see in these passages the intimate involvement of this disciple—of John—in all the events surrounding Jesus’ death, and burial, and resurrection (cf. 18:15-16). But the first time that the disciple “whom Jesus loved” appeared in this Gospel (though see 1:35-39) was at the supper on the night that Jesus was betrayed—the night that John refers to here, again, at the end of his Gospel.

- John 13:21–26 — When Jesus had said these things, He became troubled in spirit, and bore witness and said, “Truly, truly, I say to you, that one of you will betray Me.” The disciples began looking at one another, perplexed about whom He spoke. **There was reclining in Jesus’ bosom [*en... kolpos*] one of His disciples, whom Jesus loved.** So Simon Peter gestured to him to inquire, “Who is the one of whom He is speaking?” **He, leaning back thus upon Jesus’ bosom [*epi... stethos*],** said to Him, “Lord, who is it?”

It was the custom at special meals to eat reclining on the floor with your left elbow resting on a cushion, your feet stretched out at an angle away from the “table,” and your face to the back of the person to your right and your back to the face of the person on your left. This helps us understand the expression, “there was reclining in Jesus’ bosom one of His disciples...” — This is a reference to the disciple reclining on Jesus’ right, with his back facing the front (or, “in the bosom”) of Jesus. When this disciple leaned back upon Jesus’ bosom, he was leaning back toward Jesus and twisting round so as to face Him and whisper to him quietly. And yet this language of “reclining in” and “leaning back upon Jesus’ bosom” is also pointing us to a special and unique relationship that existed between “this disciple” and Jesus—between John and Jesus. In chapter one, John wrote:

- John 1:18 — No one has seen God at any time; the only begotten God who is in the bosom [*eis... kolpos*] of the Father, He has explained Him.

It was the utterly unique position of Jesus as the eternal Word and Son of God “in the bosom of the Father” that “qualified” Him to explain—or to exegete, or to reveal—the Father to us. And now John uses this same language to describe the position of the “disciple whom Jesus loved”—of *himself*—relative to Jesus at the supper. Obviously, John isn’t equating his relationship to Jesus with the relationship of Jesus to the Father. The “kind” of relationship depends upon the parties involved, and John knows well who he is and who he’s not. That’s why he chooses to remain nameless. That’s why he refers to himself “only” as the disciple “whom Jesus loved.” His point is not that he was loved more than all the other disciples (otherwise he wouldn’t have hesitated to use his own name). His point is rather that the only thing that mattered to “this disciple” is that he, an unworthy sinner, had been loved—and was still loved—by Jesus. There’s no claim to favoritism here. (And now, after the resurrection, John will also understand that the nature of his relationship with Jesus has been radically changed; see messages on 20:11-18 & 21:1-11.) Instead, there’s a complete and total self-effacing humility.

But if this is so, why does John write of himself at all? Why, specifically, does he choose to emphasize his position relative to Jesus at the Last Supper using the same language that he used at the beginning of this Gospel to describe the position of the Son relative to the Father? The fact that this is especially significant to John becomes even more apparent when we see how he

carefully repeats this language here in the closing verses of his Gospel: “Peter, turning around, saw the disciple whom Jesus loved following them; *the one who also had leaned back upon His bosom* at the supper and said, “Lord, who is the one who betrays You?”

II. John 21:21 — So Peter seeing him said to Jesus, “Lord, and what about this man?”

I think it’s most likely that what Peter actually said was, “Lord, and what about *John*?”, but that John has substituted “this man” for his own name. John is “present” here at the end of his Gospel, but still “nameless.” There’s a kind of tension in this—a tension that will increase over the next couple of verses.

“Peter seeing him [following along behind (close enough to overhear this part of the conversation)] said to Jesus, ‘Lord, and what about this man?’” We know that Peter and John were very close. Peter’s concern here is not just how long John will live or how he will die. If Peter is to suffer martyrdom in service to Christ and His kingdom, does John, too, have a role to play? And if so, what will that role be?

III. John 21:22 — Jesus said to [Peter], “If I want him to remain until I come, what is that to you? You follow Me!”

God has a different plan for each one of us. Our concern must not be the plan that he has for anyone else, but only to follow Jesus faithfully in whatever His will and plan is for me. That’s a valid “lesson” to be drawn from this verse. However, this “lesson” isn’t the main reason that John has included this exchange in his gospel. When we approach the Bible looking *primarily* for independent “lessons” (as legitimate as it might be to see these lessons in the text we’re reading), this will inevitably have the effect of turning the Bible into something moralistic and of obscuring its true power and beauty. John includes this exchange not because it’s a readymade way to teach this independent “lesson,” but rather because of how it contributes to the overarching agenda of his Gospel, and even because of how it helps to bring the entirety of this Gospel to its fitting and beautiful conclusion. His point is not ultimately Jesus’ word to Peter (“...what is that to you? You follow Me!”), but Jesus’ word to Peter about this disciple “whom Jesus loved”—Jesus’ word to Peter *about himself*.

Following along behind Jesus and Peter, the disciple “whom Jesus loved,” the one who also had leaned back upon His bosom at the supper, hears Jesus speak these words about *himself*: “If I want him to remain until I come, what is that to you...?” At one level, this is just a reference to the potential length of John’s life — the potential of even living to see the return of Christ (cf. Mat. 11:23; Jn. 12:34; 1 Cor. 15:6; Phil. 1:25; Heb. 7:24; 1 Jn. 2:17). But we remember that what Peter was really asking about was any future role that John might play in Jesus’ kingdom, so we must be careful to read Jesus’ answer in the light of this fuller understanding of Peter’s question.

The Greek word *meno* (“to remain”) is yet another “John” word.² Here in John’s Gospel, it almost always refers to a dynamic “remaining,” an active “continuing,” a fruitful “abiding.”³ So we’re told that the Spirit **remained** upon Jesus (1:32-33). The wrath of God **remains** (continues/abides) upon the one who does not obey the Son (3:36). The Jews do not have the Father’s word **abiding** (continuing/ remaining) in them (5:38). The one who eats Jesus’ flesh and drinks His blood **abides** (continues/remains) in Him (6:56; cf. 8:35). If the Jews who believe in Jesus **abide** (remain/continue) in His word, then they are truly His disciples (8:31). “The Father **abiding** [continuing/remaining] in [Jesus] does His works” (14:10). The Spirit of truth **abides** (continues/remains) in the disciples and will be in them (14:16-17). “These things,” Jesus says, “I have spoken to you while **abiding** [continuing/ remaining] with you” (14:25).

Apart from one other appearance in chapter 19 (19:31), the last time we saw this word was in chapter fifteen—where Jesus uses it eleven times.

- John 15:4–10, 16 — “**Abide/remain/continue** in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot *bear fruit* from itself unless it **remains/continues** in the vine, so neither can you unless you **remain/continue** in Me. I am the vine, you are the branches; he who **remains/continues** in Me and I in him, he *bears much fruit*, for apart from Me you can do nothing. If anyone does not **remain/continue** in Me, he is thrown away as a branch and dries up; and they gather them, and cast them into the fire and they are burned. If you **remain/continue** in Me, and My words **remain/continue** in you, *ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you*. My Father is glorified by this, that you *bear much fruit*, and so prove to be My disciples. Just as the Father has loved Me, I have also loved you; **remain/ continue** in My love. If you keep My commandments, you will **remain/continue** in My love; just as I have kept My Father’s commandments and **remain/continue** in His love... You did not choose Me but I chose you, and appointed you that you would go and *bear fruit*, and that your fruit would **remain/continue**, so that whatever you ask of the Father in My name He may give to you.”

It’s this living and active and dynamic sense of the word *meno* that we’re meant to see here in chapter 21 when the disciple “whom Jesus loved”—“the one who also had leaned back upon His bosom at the supper”—overhears Jesus speak these words concerning himself: “If it is My will that he remain/continue/abide until I come, what is that to you?” If it is My will that he work and serve and bear much fruit until I come, what is that to you?

Notice the terminal point: “*until I come*.” The nature and the character of that terminal point is what determines the nature and the character of any potential “remaining/ continuing” *until* that point (until He comes). Jesus said to His disciples in chapter fourteen:

- John 14:2–3 — “I go to prepare a place for you. And if 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.”

² It appears forty times in this Gospel and only 12 times in the other three gospels combined. Of the 118 times *meno* appears in the New Testament, 40 of these times are in John’s gospel and 24 of these times are in John’s first epistle. That’s more than half of the times that this word appears in the entire New Testament.

³ Unless the context is a physical or geographical location where someone is *staying/abiding* (cf. 1:38-39; 2:12; 4:40; 7:9; 10:40; 11:6, 54).

The “coming” of Jesus is a coming to receive us to Himself. So a “remaining” and “continuing” potentially *until He comes* must be a living to be always ready and prepared for that coming. Later in chapter fourteen, Jesus says to His disciples:

- John 14:12–13, 28 — “Truly, truly, I say to you, he who believes in Me, the works that I do, he will do also; and greater works than these he will do because I go to the Father. Whatever you ask in My name, this will I do, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son... You heard that I said to you, ‘I go away, and I will *come* to you.’ If you loved Me, you would have rejoiced because I go to the Father, for the Father is greater than I.”

The “coming” of Jesus is a coming to consummate the “greater works” that He will do in and through His disciples. So a “remaining” and “continuing” potentially *until He comes* must be—by definition—a life of faithful service and fruit-bearing while we wait for that coming. This is the fuller meaning, then, of the words that John “overhears” Jesus speaking to Peter concerning himself: “If I want him to remain until I come...” Whatever it is that Jesus “wants” (or “wills”; *thelo*) for John, it won’t just concern how long he lives. Whatever it is that Jesus “wants” (or “wills”) for John, it will include all the work that He has called him to for *as long as he* “remains” — including the writing of this very Gospel.

It’s in these words of Jesus, then, that John hears—alongside the calling and commission of Peter—his own calling and commission. What he hears is not primarily Jesus’ correction of Peter (“what is that to you”) or His repeated exhortation to Peter (“you follow Me”), but rather what Jesus says to Peter concerning himself. “If I want [John] to remain [to continue serving Me and bearing much fruit and doing the ‘greater works’ that I have given him to do—if I want him to remain] until I come, what is that to you? You follow Me!” In this emphatic “you” (*sy*) addressed to Peter, John hears another emphatic “you” addressed to himself: And you, John, you *continue* in fruit-bearing and faithful service to Me, performing the “greater works” that I have given you to do, for as long as you *remain*.

IV. John 21:23 — Therefore this saying went out among the brothers that this disciple would not die; yet Jesus did not say to him that he would not die, but, “If I want him to remain until I come, what is that to you?”

Does John include this verse only to correct a false interpretation of Jesus’ words—only to point out what Jesus does *not* say? The NASB adds the word, “only” (cf. NIV; LSB): “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?’” But in fact this word-for-word repetition of Jesus’ words is intended—in the end—to emphasize what Jesus *does* say: “Jesus did not say to him that he would not die, *but [He said this]*, ‘If I want him to remain until I come, what is that to you?’” This repetition of what Jesus *does* say is meant to emphasize all the more His sovereign and gracious calling upon the life of John, who will be known to the very end of his gospel only as the disciple “whom Jesus loved.” That’s what John hears in Jesus’ words to Peter.

And here, again, we feel the tension. We see how completely and totally self-effacing John continues to be even as he’s drawing our attention to his own apostolic calling and commission. We see how completely and totally self-effacing John continues to be even as he’s more

“present” in these closing verses than he’s been anywhere else in this Gospel. In fact, we might still be tempted to wonder if it really is his Apostolic calling and commission that he’s emphasizing—until we read in verse 24:

V. John 21:24 (cf. 19:32-37) — *This* is the disciple [“the one who also had leaned back on (Jesus’) bosom at the supper”; and the one of whom Jesus said, “if I want him to remain until I come...”—*this* is the disciple] who is bearing witness to these things and wrote these things, *and we know that his witness is true.*

Here, then, is the resolution of the tension between the John who is present and the John who is nameless. To the extent that John draws any attention to himself, it’s only so that we might believe the witness that He has borne to Jesus Christ. His “we,” here, is what we call an editorial “we” (cf. 1:14). John is saying: “*I* know that my witness is true, and *you also* have come to know that my witness is true.” “We know that his witness is true” because this is the disciple who was “reclining in” and “leaning back upon Jesus’ bosom” and who is therefore uniquely qualified to write of these things that he has “seen with [his] eyes, [and] beheld and touched with [his] hands, concerning the Word of Life” (1 Jn. 1:3; cf. 1:18). We know that his witness is true because this is the disciple of whom Jesus Himself was speaking when He said to Peter (for John also to hear): “If I want him to remain until I come, what is that to you?” And always undergirding this certainty of the truth of John’s witness is the self-authenticating power of God’s own witness (5:31-32, 36-37, 39 [cf. 8:18; 10:25]; 8:13-14; 15:26-27 [cf. 16:12-15]). What does John say?—“This is the disciple who is bearing witness to *these things* and wrote *these things*...” “We know that [John’s] witness is true” because we have believed the greater witness (cf. 5:36) that God Himself has borne throughout these pages to the saving person and work of Jesus Christ (cf. 20:30-31).

“*This* is the disciple [“the one who also had leaned back on (Jesus’) bosom at the supper”; and the one of whom Jesus said, ‘if I want him to remain until I come...’—*this* is the disciple] who is bearing witness to these things and wrote these things, and we know [(do we not?), with the saving certainty of faith] that his witness is true.” And so even as this Gospel began with the “witness” (*martyria/martyreo*) of John the Baptist (1:7-8, 15, 32, 34; 3:26; 5:33-34, 36), so now it ends with the reminder that this entire Gospel has been nothing more nor less than the Apostle John’s own “witness” to that greater witness that God has borne concerning His Son, Jesus Christ.

It’s only here, then, at the end of this Gospel, that John is finally content to say “*I*”:

VI. John 21:25 — And there are also many other things which Jesus did, which if they were written one after the other, I suppose that even the world itself could not contain the books that would be written.

John’s only desire throughout this Gospel has been that we see Jesus in all of His limitless saving power and beauty, so that believing in Him we might have life in His name (20:30-31). There is, then, only one question to be asked as we come to the end of John’s Gospel: Do you believe that this Jesus is the Christ the Son of God? Do you have, today, eternal life in His name? If the answer is no, then won’t you repent of this unbelief and put your faith and trust in Him today? If

the answer is yes, then won't you know how rich and how blessed you are? If the answer is yes, then let us, too, *continue* bearing fruit in faithful service to Jesus, performing those "greater works" that He has given us to do *until He comes*—or for as long as He wants us to remain.