

JOHN — WEEK 30

FOLLOW ME



F. Michael Slay
A DEEP Study

The Fellowship of Ailbe

The cover image is *Ecce Homo (Behold the Man)* by Caravaggio

Jesus's encounter with His disciples on the shore has a quiet, laid back feel to it. He teaches Peter yet another painful lesson, but it's really to prepare him for total service. John then reports a well-known conversation between Jesus and Peter but corrects a popular misunderstanding of it.

Lastly, John concludes his gospel by noting its necessary brevity.

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Thank you.

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1 John 21:9–14

Then, as soon as they had come to land, they saw a fire of coals there, and fish laid on it, and bread. Jesus said to them, “Bring some of the fish which you have just caught.”

Simon Peter went up and dragged the net to land, full of large fish, one hundred and fifty-three; and although there were so many, the net was not broken. Jesus said to them, “Come and eat breakfast.” Yet none of the disciples dared ask Him, “Who are You?”—knowing that it was the Lord. Jesus then came and took the bread and gave it to them, and likewise the fish.

This is now the third time Jesus showed Himself to His disciples after He was raised from the dead.

Make no mistake; this is a miracle. Remember, the disciples had been fishing all night and caught nothing. Jesus tells them to cast their net on the right side of the boat, which is, what, ten feet away from the left side of the boat, and they catch 153 fish. No way.

There’s no special meaning to the number 153. Fishermen count their catch, and this one was big.

But notice that Jesus already had fish roasting on the coals. He invites the disciples to add to the feast from their catch, but some breakfast is ready now.

The striking thing about this encounter is its normalness. Readers mostly notice the size of the catch, and the net not being broken, but the laid-back breakfast is what this is really all about.

John’s point is merely that *this is now the third time Jesus showed Himself to His disciples after He was raised from the dead.*

Each one of these encounters includes a miracle, either Jesus passing through locked doors or delivering a boatload of fish, but the miracles are just props. They enable the scenes, but they aren’t what the scenes are about. The main storyline is Jesus just being a normal guy.

The disciples get all excited, but Jesus stays as cool as a cucumber.

Jesus’s resurrection is the most important miracle in history. It validates the most important fact in history—that Jesus is Lord. Jesus shows Himself many times to prove it, yet He suppresses the spectacle.

This is a curious bookend to how it all began, when the angels appeared to the shepherds watching their flocks by night. That was a great spectacle, which blew away its eyewitnesses, but it was only for the shepherds. It wasn’t very public.

This is of a type with Jesus using ordinary people like you and me (and His disciples) to spread His gospel. He’s perfectly capable of big, showy miracles, but He rarely does things that way.

That’s just not His style.

2 John 21:15–17 (ESV)

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, “Feed my lambs.” He said to him 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, “Tend 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 everything; you know that I love you.” Jesus said to him, “Feed my sheep.

This doesn't work in English. There are two different Greek words that translate into “love,” but their meanings are different. Agapas (αγαπας) is sacrificial love—the “I'd take a bullet for you” kind of love. Philo (φιλω) is just strong affection. To illustrate the difference, I'll substitute “LOVE” for the cases where the text uses agapas.

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, “Feed my lambs.” He said to him 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, “Tend 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 everything; you know that I love you.” Jesus said to him, “Feed my sheep.

The amazing truth is that Peter will go on to take a bullet for Jesus. In fact, his martyrdom makes taking a bullet look like easy street. There is reason to believe Peter was crucified.

So, once again, Peter is getting schooled by Jesus in a way he'll never be able to shake.

Remember this the next time God takes you to the woodshed. Sanctification is a big deal. He wants us to grow, and our comfort is of little importance compared to that.

Thus, God often hammers His saints hard. Being shamed or embarrassed half to death is nothing.

So, the next time God disciplines you, suck it up, buttercup, and focus on the lesson. You've paid the tuition, now get your money's worth. Think hard about what the Lord is trying to teach you.

This leads to one of the most important kinds of prayers—asking God to help you understand what He's teaching you. His lessons can get deep, and not seeing them immediately is normal, but understand that you may be asking to get thwacked again. If you really want to learn, that should be okay.

And note that there can be great comfort buried inside these painful lessons. The sense of His presence is most strong when He is disciplining us.

Things may be unpleasant, but they sure as heck aren't random.

3 John 21:18–19

Most assuredly, I say to you, when you were younger, you girded yourself and walked where you wished; but when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and another will gird you and carry you where you do not wish.” This He spoke, signifying by what death he would glorify God. And when He had spoken this, He said to him, “Follow Me.”

Jesus has forgiven Peter. His triple command to “*feed my sheep*” settles that. Peter now has a job to do.

Here Jesus follows that up with a stark warning. The words, “*you will stretch out your hands,*” and, “*carry you where you do not wish,*” hint at crucifixion.

Tradition holds that Peter was crucified upside down because he didn’t want to be crucified the same way his Lord was. There little hard evidence of his being crucified (upside down or otherwise), but we do know that Peter was martyred. Clement of Rome’s first letter to the Corinthians mentions Peter’s martyrdom.

Peter, through unrighteous envy, endured not one or two, but numerous labours, and when he had finally suffered martyrdom, departed to the place of glory due to him. — 1 Clement 5:4 (Roberts-Donaldson translation)

If there’s any doubt about what Jesus is saying here, John leaves no doubt with, “*This He spoke, signifying by what death he would glorify God.*”

“*Stretch out your hands,*” isn’t an exercise.

Experts disagree on exactly what Jesus meant by, “*Follow Me.*” He’ll say it again in verse 22, so it doesn’t seem to be a command to follow Him somewhere at that moment.

More likely, it’s a command to be a follower of Christ. That’s hardly surprising.

But there might be the double-entendre of Peter following Christ to the cross. If Peter is to follow in Jesus’s footsteps, it means more than just believing in Him. Peter is to be the head of Christ’s church, and that’s a bold assignment.

Still, the commands Jesus gives Peter are commands for us, too. “Following” Jesus is more than just believing, or even working for, Him. Jesus set an example that we are meant to emulate.

Obviously, this doesn’t mean things like raise our friends from the dead or feed 5,000 people; only Jesus can do those things. We are called to think and act like Christ—to have His heart, His perspective, His priorities.

He is the model. We are the copies.

We are called to follow in His footsteps, wherever they may lead.

4 John 21:20–24

Then Peter, turning around, saw the disciple whom Jesus loved following, who also had leaned on His breast at the supper, and said, “Lord, who is the one who betrays You?” Peter, seeing him, said to Jesus, “But Lord, what about this man?”

Jesus said to him, “If I will that he remain till I come, what is that to you? You follow Me.”

Then this saying went out among the brethren that this disciple would not die. Yet Jesus did not say to him that he would not die, but, “If I will that he remain till I come, what is that to you?”

This is the disciple who testifies of these things, and wrote these things; and we know that his testimony is true.

John is fact-checking a rumor! At the time John wrote his gospel, a rumor was circulating about his own lifespan. People thought John would outlive the wait for the second coming.

John would, of course, love that, but he knew that this isn't what Jesus meant when He said to Peter, *“If I will that he remain till I come, what is that to you? You follow Me.”*

So now he has to correct the record. John, who folks think will last until Jesus returns, walks it back.

No guarantees.

This is one of those “current events” Bible passages that is so unlike what we read in other religions. While Christianity has plenty of wisdom literature, it also has a lot of “reporting.” Some parts read like a newspaper. This gives Christianity a unique feel that we often ignore, or at least underappreciate.

Generally, one subscribes to a religion because they like it. It sounds good, or wise, or something like that. Not so with Christianity. While it's likable enough, it stands or falls on whether it's true or false. Whether you like it or not shouldn't be why you believe. Either Jesus rose from the dead or He didn't.

People don't believe in things like gravity or the Pythagorean Theorem because they like them; they're either true or they aren't. Liking them isn't relevant. I hate that COVID kills, but I still believe it.

Unfortunately, we often sell Christianity based on its likability. We say, “Heaven is a free gift.” That's true, but if we evangelize based on Christianity's benefits, we get believers who believe based on its benefits. Much of what's wrong with the church today is that it's full of such self-centered believers.

We need to get back to the gospel as John wrote it.

He rose.

And if Christ is not risen, your faith is futile; ... we are of all men the most pitiable. — 1 Corinthians 15:17a, 19b

5 John 21:25

And there are also many other things that Jesus did, which if they were written one by one, I suppose that even the world itself could not contain the books that would be written. Amen.

The Bible is a very long book. When printed on normal paper in a normal font, a Bible is as big as a large dictionary. Thus, many Bibles are printed on thinner paper and/or in a small font. They would be quite expensive if it weren't for the extraordinary efforts of many saints to keep them affordable.

Still, every book in the Bible is brief compared to what it could have been. This is especially true of the gospels. Each page is a significant accomplishment. There was no paper back then. John either wrote on papyrus (made from the pith of the papyrus plant), on parchment (animal skin), or on vellum (premium parchment made from calf skin). It was difficult in any case.

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Papyrus>

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Parchment>

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vellum>

The brevity issue can affect how we interpret some passages. The constraints of brevity should not be ignored when considering how the Bible is inspired.

If one interpretation implies serious omissions, while another implies that the text is nearly comprehensive, the second should be favored (all else being equal).

This is the Bible exegesis version of Occam's razor.

<https://www.britannica.com/topic/Occams-razor>

John wrote his gospel late in life. His use of the name "Tiberias" for the Sea of Galilee indicates a date after AD 70. Apparently, the other gospels preceded that date by many years and, presumably, John was familiar with them. Anyone who knew John would want him to see what the others had written.

Consider the implication. For John to see one of the other gospels or epistles, someone had to make a copy by hand. Clicking a button to forward something was still a couple of thousand years away.

That copying is one of the most important things the early Christians did. Where would we be without their holy labor?

And don't miss the prophetic nature of John's final words. *I suppose that even the world itself could not contain the books that would be written.*

Now that many things, including the DEEP, exist electronically, we have infinitely more "room" for writings about Jesus. If every electronic copy of all the works was printed out, it would get crowded.

