

John Chapter 21

When we turn to the gospel of John, we expect to see the devotional side of Christ and His apostles. But we can also on many occasions see the laying out of broad dispensational truth, especially when we come to the signs of this gospel. We have to take this broad view of dispensational truth first. In the previous chapter, the Lord meets His disciples in two successive first days of the week.

On the first occasion, ten disciples are gathered ie the eleven remaining disciples, without Thomas. They are in a room with closed doors. The world is locked out, as well as the locked door preserving the company. The disciples receive certain things from the risen Lord.

1. Peace
2. His commission – as the Father hath sent Me, even so send I you.
3. The presence of the Holy Spirit
4. Authority to act on His behalf

These are the essential things required for this dispensation of grace, the church age

A week later, the Lord re-appears, but this time Thomas is present. Thomas is typical the Jews. "Except I see....I will not believe". He is typical of the Jewish remnant which comes to faith in Christ when He returns again in glory.

Now we come to John 21. Apart from the church and Israel, who else is to be blessed? – surely those from amongst the Gentile nations who will receive a place in the millennial kingdom of Christ? Hence in verse 1, we come with the disciples to the Sea of Galilee, only here called the sea of Tiberias. The sea is often used in the Bible to describe the restless unsettled condition of the Gentiles. Hence in Revelation chapter 21 for example, the first beast arises out of the sea.

Let us now consider the details of the chapter. Some of the disciples are gathered together at the sea of Tiberias. This is better known to us as the sea of Galilee, but it had been re-named Tiberias no doubt to honour Tiberius Caesar, the Roman emperor at this time. The times of the Gentiles will continue until the Lord comes again to Israel. Five disciples are named in verse 2, along with two others unnamed. Thomas is among them. Having missed out on the news of the Lord's resurrection, he is now sticking to Peter and the others like glue and he is mentioned (unusually) immediately after Peter. Next comes Nathaniel. Here was the man who asked the question in chapter 1, "Can any good thing come out of Nazareth?" He is now numbered with His disciples. It is assumed that Nathaniel is the same man as Bartholomew mentioned as one of the twelve. They are all here in Galilee in keeping with the words spoken by the Lord to the women at the tomb. The disciples were to go into Galilee and there they would see Him.

But soon the impatience of Peter takes over, and he tells the others, "I go a fishing". Six others say, "We also go with thee". We do not know the whereabouts of the four remaining disciples, but already we can see that Peter's action has divided the company of the disciples. Six have gone with him, four have not. If we act only on our own desires, we are liable to divide the company also. What was the result of their action? "That night they caught nothing." It is a similar result to that first experience they had of Christ in Luke chapter 5. Then also, they toiled all night but caught nothing.

In verse 4, we learn that in the morning "Jesus stood on the shore", but they did not recognise Him, just like the two on the road to Emmaus, and even Mary Magdalene at

the tomb. The stranger on the shore asks the disciples, "Children, have ye any meat". It is most touching the way that He addresses them. He calls them "Children". It is the same word He used when He told His disciples, "Suffer the little children to come unto Me". But His tender words receive a rather frosty reply, "No". He then gives them instructions, "Cast the net on the right side of the ship and ye shall find". He will prove Himself to be not only the master of the sea, but the master of the fish of the sea, just as He did in Luke 5. In John 21, however, we note that there are differences from that first occasion. In Luke, the net broke because of the weight of the fish, and no doubt some of the fish escaped, but in John 21, the net is not broken. Luke 5 typifies the response of men to the gospel – some are caught, others are released. But in John 21, none are lost. Indeed, the catch is numbered precisely – there were 153 fish. Is there a significance in the number? Had there been 151 or 155, the same truth would have been taught – every fish was precious, every fish was counted. Divine things are precious and like the feeding of the 5000, nothing is to be lost. Again, here in chapter 21 of John, the fish are described as "great fish". The Lord's provision is never small. In John chapter 6, we read about the lad with the barley loaves and two small fishes. Men had the meanest provision, but the Lord made much of it. In John 21, it is the Lord's provision and the fish are great fish.

But how did the disciples react to this catch? John is the first to respond, and he says to Peter, "It is the Lord". The disciple whom Jesus loved, who reclined upon His bosom, is the first to recognise Him. Peter responds in a way typical of the man. He pulls his fisherman's coat about him, and dived into the sea. He leaves the other disciples to do the hard work of pulling the net to the shore.

In verse 9, we read of how the disciples found the Lord beside a fire of coals, with fish laid thereon, and bread. The fire of coals would have brought unhappy memories back to Peter. In John 18, Peter had stood beside the fire of coals in the palace of Caiaphas, and twice over we read that he warmed himself. It was the warmth of compromise with the world. Now the Lord has stirred up memories in Peter. He had denied the Lord three times, now the Lord standing beside the fire of coals is going to put three questions to Peter. Where did the Lord get the coals from? He stood on the shore of the lake. One would have expected a fire of driftwood, but the Lord provided the coals. He also provided the fish and the bread. He did not need the fish of the disciples, but in grace He says, "Bring of the fish which ye have now caught". He invites them to come and dine and gives them the bread and fish to eat. We do not read of the Lord eating here, but in Luke 24, He ate the broiled fish and the honeycomb, further proof of the physical nature of His resurrection body.

In verses 16 to 19, the Lord turns His attention upon Peter. Peter had failed the Lord terribly in his denials. Matthew's gospel describes the language of Peter that night. He denied. He denied with an oath. Peter began to curse and to swear. He was beginning to talk like the servants and soldiers that he stood beside. In John's account, Peter is confronted by a man who has just returned from the garden of Gethsemane. He had taken careful note of Peter, for Peter had attacked his kinsman, Malchus, and had cut off his ear. The man asks Peter, "Did not I see thee in the garden with Him?" Peter responded with another denial.

Had we been standing beside Peter that night, we might well have written him off. Was Peter saved at all? And if he was, could the Lord ever use him again in His service? But the Lord never gives up on His own. Even before Peter fell, the Lord had taken steps which would prove vital in Peter's recovery.

1. In Luke 22, the Lord tells Peter that he would deny Him, but He also tells him, "I have prayed for thee, that thy faith fail not". The Lord has already prayed for Peter's recovery.

2. In John 13, we hear the dialogue between the Lord and Peter, as the Lord kneels before His disciples to wash their feet. Peter thinks this is too humble a task for the Lord to be doing, hence he begins with a question, "Dost Thou wash my feet?" Both "Thou" and "my" are emphatic. But the Lord underlines the importance of His task when He tells Peter, "If I wash thee not, thou hast no part with Me". The feet washing is a pictorial representation of our Advocate cleansing us from the defilement of the way. Without this cleansing, we cannot have fellowship with Him. Peter, more than any of the disciples, would soon need that cleansing.
3. The Lord's third step in dealing with Peter is giving him a sign. Before the cock had crowed twice, Peter would have denied his Lord three times. The significance of the cock crowing twice is brought out most poignantly in Mark's gospel. Mark tells us that Peter denied and the cock crew. Then Peter denied again. On hearing the cock crowing for the first time, Peter had the chance to stop and pull himself together, but he didn't heed the warning of the first crowing of the cock.
4. This reminds me of a holiday my wife and I had in Israel in the year 2000. We arrived in the early hours of the morning and drove towards Jerusalem, getting there about 4 am. The city was deadly quiet – all we could hear was the occasional barking of a dog somewhere. Then we heard it – the cock crew. The sound of it made hair stand on end – the noise was so clear that it reminded me of Peter – he could not have failed to hear the cock crowing. It should have stopped Peter in his tracks. What did the Lord say? - "Before the cock crow twice". He had denied once – he should have stopped what he was doing on the spot. But he denied again, and the cock crowed a second time.
5. While Peter was denying the Lord in the palace of Caiaphas, the Lord is surrounded by the servants and the soldiers, being ridiculed and punched and beaten. Yet He hears every word spoken by Peter at the door, and when he denies for the third time, Luke tells us how the Lord turned and looked upon Peter. It is too much for him, and he went out and wept bitterly.
6. In Mark 16:7, the angel at the tomb has a message for the women to pass on to His disciples.

But go your way, tell his disciples and Peter that he goeth before you into Galilee: there shall ye see him, as he said unto you.

Just when Peter was maybe thinking that he was finished, that the Lord could never use him again, the women arrive with the message of the angel. It was a message for His brethren; and Peter, he got a special mention. The angel spoke about him by name. Perhaps there was hope after all.

7. In Luke 24, we read of the appearing of the Lord to the two on the road to Emmaus. They return again to Jerusalem to share their news with the disciples. But the disciples have got their own exciting news:

The Lord is risen indeed and hath appeared unto Simon

We do not know what was said on that occasion, but we can imagine that it would be a painful experience for Peter to meet the Lord again after all his denials. It is perhaps a mercy that the Spirit of God has chosen to draw a veil over the meeting, but it was an essential part of the process of Peter's recovery. So the Lord restored Peter privately.

What we see in John 21 is the seventh and final stage in Peter's restoration. There would be little point in the Lord restoring Peter in private if Peter did not have the approval of his fellow disciples. They needed to have the confidence in Peter in order

to work with him. So when Peter stood up with the apostles on the day of Pentecost, he had the full support of his brethren.

But why were so many steps required in the process? Could the Lord not have done it in one single step? It was because of the depths to which Peter fell that night. Every step on the road to recovery was a vital one. It reminds me of the feet washing in John chapter 13. The little conjunction "and" is mentioned no less than five times. It joins together statements of equal importance. Each statement is part of a sequence of events, each one of equal importance to the end result which was washed and dried feet. So it was with the Lord and Peter.

In verse 15, the Lord asks Peter the first of three questions.

Lovest thou Me more than these?

It is important in this section to differentiate between the different Greek words for "love" and "feed". They are translated identically in our English bible, but they are not all the same. The word used by the Lord for "lovest" is AGAPE, frequently used in John's gospel to describe the love of the Father and the Son for men. Hence it is used in John 3:16, and in John 13:1 – "Having loved His own which were in the world, He loved them unto the end. We find it also in John 15:9 – "As the Father hath loved Me, even so love I you".

But what did the Lord mean by "more than these". It is obviously a point of comparison but with what? Did the Lord mean more than these disciples or even more than these fish? I believe not. We need to go back to the upper room in Matthew 26 and listen to the proud boast of Peter:

3 Peter answered and said unto him, Though all men shall be offended because of thee, yet will I never be offended.

35 Peter said unto him, Though I should die with thee, yet will I not deny thee. Likewise also said all the disciples.

Peter was saying in effect, "Lord, others might let you down, but you know that you can depend on me." So, how does Peter respond to the Lord's first question?

"Thou knowest that I love Thee"

Peter, however, used a different word than AGAPE when he spoke. He used the word PHILEO, which is a weaker word than AGAPE. It has the sense of "to be fond of". Peter was saying, "Thou knowest that I am fond of Thee". The Lord replies again, "Feed my lambs". There is a tenderness in the Saviour's words. The lambs of the flock need much more care than the full grown sheep. In his first epistle, Peter commands the new born babes to earnestly desire the sincere milk of the word.

The Lord then puts a second question.

"Lovest thou me?"

There is no comparison now with others. It is a straightforward question, "Do you love Me?" Peter replies exactly as before, using again PHILEO.

In response, the Lord tells Peter, "Feed my sheep". The word for "feed" means to tend the sheep. Be a shepherd to them, like the shepherd of Psalm 23.

1 The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want. 2 He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters

The Lord proceeds with a third question

"Lovest thou me?"

Now the Lord decides to use Peter's word for love, PHILEO. He is asking Peter, "Are

you fond of Me". Peter is grieved because the Lord has asked a third time, "Lovest thou me?" His irritation comes out in his reply. "Thou knowest all things. Thou knowest that I love Thee". Peter knew that He being the Son of God, He had the divine characteristic of omniscience. The Lord continues the conversation.

"Feed my sheep".

When using the word "feed", the Lord now reverts to the first word He used which means to feed, to nourish. Peter will use the same word in I Peter, when he gives advice to the overseers.

2 Feed the flock of God which is among you, taking the oversight thereof, not by constraint, but willingly; not for filthy lucre, but of a ready mind;

As good shepherds, they were to feed the flock.

Verse 18 introduces us to a new subject. The Lord proceeds to tell Peter what will happen to him in his old age. In the immediate future, Peter would have the liberty to go wherever he wished, but when he was old, others would bind him and take him where he did not desire. History would tell us that Peter was crucified like the Lord Jesus. Peter's own words were eventually fulfilled. "I will lay down my life for Thy sake".

The Lord's promise of longevity perhaps influenced Peter in Acts chapter 12. Herod has taken James and Peter into custody. Herod put James to the sword, and when he saw that this pleased the Jews, he decided to do likewise the next day with Peter. Peter is in the condemned cell, presumably facing death within a few hours. But is Peter pacing his cell in anxious fear? Rather he falls into such a deep sleep that the angel of the Lord has to give him a dig in the ribs to waken him. Was Peter depending on the words of the Saviour, "When thou art old"?

Peter should now have been content and relieved to know that the Lord was indeed able to use him, and had commissioned him to care for His sheep. But soon, the old Peter comes out again. Looking at John beside him, he asks the Lord, "What shall this man do?" In verse 20, John has reminded us that he is the disciple whom Jesus loved, who leaned upon His breast in the upper room. Because John was nearer to the Lord than Peter himself, both physically and spiritually, Peter beckons to John that he should ask who it was that was going to betray Him.

The Lord's reply led to much speculation amongst the disciples that John would not die, but the Lord made no such statement. He was simply making the point that it was His sovereign will that decided how long a man should live. As it happened, John outlived his fellow apostles by 25 to 30 years, and lived long enough to receive the revelation of Jesus Christ and future events linked with His coming again to earth.

In the concluding verse, John makes reference to the many things that Jesus did which are not in his book. John selects only seven or eight miracles but Jesus healed hundreds more. Each person healed was a story that could have taken up a page of our bible. The world could scarcely contain the books that might have been written.

This final appearing in John of the Lord in resurrection underlines the importance of each appearance to the person or persons involved. The Lord not only appeared to His own, He appeared for His own. He gave each person just exactly what he or she needed at that moment in time. The two on the road to Emmaus needed instruction to restore their faith in Him. They got a sermon, which turned sad hearts into glad hearts. In John 20, the Lord came to mend the broken heart of Mary Magdalene. She didn't need a sermon. One word was sufficient – "Mary". The ten disciples in the same chapter had fearful hearts, and the Lord gave them just what they needed – peace. Thomas had his doubts and the Lord showed him his hands and His side to dispel those doubts. Peter needed recovery, and that is just what he got from the Lord –

restoration and a new commission.