



# Notes for Preaching - Doug Beacham

## 6th Sunday of Easter (May 17, 2020)

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### Introduction

Since Easter, we have focused on the appearances of Jesus recorded in Luke and John. We will conclude these appearances on May 24 as we focus on the Ascension of Jesus. May 31 is Pentecost Sunday, and I hope you will take advantage of the numerous resources being prepared for the ten days between Ascension and Pentecost that can be found at [www.iphc.org](http://www.iphc.org) and our social media pages. That ten-day period will continue to lay the groundwork for the IPHC vision of **Arise 2033** (<https://iphc.org/arise/>).

As we conclude this portion of Jesus' appearances as recorded by John, we will examine John 21:15-25 in two sections: 21:15-19 and 21:20-25. As noted in previous weeks, any direct observations based on Raymond E. Brown will be indicated in parenthesis and page number from *The Gospel According to John, Volume II* in the Anchor Bible series. Also, I will cite page numbers in F.F. Bruce, *The Gospel of John: Introduction, Exposition and Notes* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1983).

### Observations and Commentary

#### John 21:15-19

1. These verses are well known to most preachers/teachers as there is much discussion and debate related to the three-fold repetitions of *love, service, sheep, and intimacy*. Keep in mind that the setting is directly connected to 21:1-14, where Jesus was on the shore of the Sea of Galilee with a cooking fire, and fish and bread already prepared.
  2. The first question Jesus asks is in verse 15: "Do you love Me more than these?" This was briefly mentioned in our study last week. Here I will give a little more attention. Bruce remarks that the Greek is ambiguous and could refer to a) Peter's occupation as a fisherman, or b) to the other disciples (7 total) who are with Jesus on the seashore.
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3. Bruce takes the view that it is likely a reference to the other disciples, based on the entire context of John's gospel record (p. 404). Even at that, the phrase suggests multiple interpretations. One is, "Do you love Me more than these other disciples love Me?" That seems a harsh interpretation as it pits Peter and the disciples against one another in terms of "who loves Jesus the most?" Another possibility is, "Do you love Me more than you love these other disciples?" This seems more reasonable as it calls forth a complete love of Jesus above any other person.

4. The second question relates to the three-fold use of two different Greek words for "love," for "tending sheep," for the "sheep" themselves, and for "to know." Both Bruce and Brown chose not to put much emphasis on the differences in the terms. Bruce remarked that "this interplay of synonyms is a feature of the writer's Greek; it can hardly represent a comparable variation of vocabulary in the language which Jesus and Peter probably spoke" (p. 404). But that raises another question: What language did the disciples and Jesus speak? Likely their primary language was Aramaic, a language closely related to Hebrew. The language of the synagogue and the reading of Scripture would have been Hebrew. In any case, most first-century Jews in Galilee and Judea would have been functional in both languages. It is also likely that many Jews, including many of the disciples and Jesus, would have been somewhat functional in Greek and Latin. I believe that the conversations recorded in this part of John were in Aramaic and/or Hebrew; thus, the words would not have been as distinct as in Greek. Why John wrote in this fashion is something that John does not explain. As Bruce observed above, it may have been merely a stylistic choice, so as not to avoid repetition (Bruce gives examples on p. 405).

5. The key point is not in the differences of the words. Instead, two other factors are significant:

- a. Is this an exercise where Jesus rehabilitates Peter in light of Peter's previous words and actions? It seems likely when seen in light of some preceding events of Peter's life. We remember the scene at the Last Supper, where Peter spoke boldly. Luke 22:31-34 tells us that Jesus spoke directly to Peter, calling him Simon twice. There Jesus told Peter that he would be "sifted as wheat" but that his "faith would not fail, and when you have returned to Me . . . ." In John 13:38, during the Last

Supper, Jesus spoke of His death, and Peter replied, "I will lay down my life for Your sake." In reply, Jesus told Peter that he would deny Him three times.

b. Given Peter's public displays of bravado faith, and his failure in the hour of crisis, and Jesus' promise to bring Peter to restoration, it should not surprise us that one of the Gospel records describes that restoration. Notice the pattern of three denials and three questions that occur.

c. Besides being a moment of restoration, this encounter is also a moment of commissioning. This is described in some detail in Brown, pp. 1104, 1112ff. Notice that the themes of John 21:15-17 are picked up by Peter himself in 1 Peter 5:2-4. Here Jesus is identified as the Chief Shepherd (5:4). No doubt, Peter remembered Jesus' extensive teaching in John 10, where He said, "I am the Good Shepherd" (10:11, see 10:1-30).

d. Notice in 1 Peter 5:2 that Peter, likely some 25-30 years after the encounter in John 21, encouraged others to "shepherd the flock of God." He specifically emphasized that pastoral leaders "serving as overseers" (*episkopos*, used as a participle in 5:2, and denotes someone with God-given authority). This pattern is also mentioned in 1 Peter 2:25). The remainder of verses 2-4 makes it clear that our service as pastoral leaders is done in the spirit and example of Christ. The sheep do not exist to serve us; we exist to serve the sheep.

e. Brown discusses the issues related to this John 21 episode with Peter's later role in church leadership, especially in Rome. While this is fascinating reading, it's an exegetical fallacy to read the Papacy of the Roman Catholic Church back into this particular text. What seems more likely is that Jesus pointed Peter to what his role was to be as he "followed Jesus" (21:19). We know that Peter had a significant role as the church developed, as portrayed in the book of Acts. Even the Apostle Paul affirmed Peter's place as an apostle to the Jews (Galatians 2:7).

f. Notice that the key to the commission is a) restoration and b) a clear understanding that the sheep are Jesus' sheep: "Feed *My* sheep." It is crucial in our various ministry roles that we remember Who the Chief Shepherd is and that the

people in our congregations are not our sheep but Jesus' sheep, and we are accountable to Him for how we feed, serve, and protect His sheep.

g. There is no contradiction between Peter and Paul in this understanding. Just as we saw in 1 Peter the understanding of that apostle, we see the Apostle Paul expressing much the same in Acts 20:28-30.

6. The third major piece of this portion of the text is in 21:18, 19. It is clear from verse 19 that Jesus told Peter that he would die as a martyr to the faith. The language of "stretch out your hands, another will gird you and carry you where you do not wish," strongly implies crucifixion by the Romans, the same method as Jesus died. Bruce remarked about the close similarity between the thought of 21:18, 19, and what Jesus said in John 12:32, 33 (p. 406). Notice that the Biblical text does not say that Peter would be crucified upside down. That tradition comes from the apocryphal Acts of Peter, "I beseech you the executioners, crucify me thus, with the head downward and not otherwise."

7. It is important to note that in these closing comments with Peter, Jesus repeats what He said three years earlier at the Sea of Galilee, "Follow Me" (Mark 1:17). In the final analysis, every aspect of life from the call, to restoration, to commissioning, is about following Jesus.

### **John 21:20-25 - Observations**

1. To me, this is one of the most intriguing passages of Scripture in the Bible in that it reveals the complexities of human experience, even among those called, commissioned, sanctified to the Master's service.
2. Following the emotionally charged exchange of 21:15-19, Peter looks at John and wants to know, "What about this man?" John is self-identified as the disciple that Jesus loved and who was leaning on Jesus' chest at the Last Supper.
3. We know the disciples competed with one another for positions in the kingdom of God. Even their mothers were caught up in the question of position (Matt 18:1; Mark 9:34; Luke 9:46; 22:24; for a mother, Matt 20:20, 21).
4. Jesus answered Peter with a remark that later was misunderstood related to a rumor that John would not die (21:23). The point of Jesus' rebuke to Peter was quite simply to the

effect that John's destiny was different from Peter's, but both had the same path: Follow Me.

5. This gospel account ends with the affirmation that the writer, John, wrote these things and testifies that they are true. Furthermore, the book concludes with the comment that Jesus said and did so many more things that are not recorded in the records the Holy Spirit preserved. So extensive were Jesus' words and deeds that, "I suppose that even the world itself could not contain the books that would be written" (21:25).

### **Preaching Thoughts**

1. F.F. Bruce used this illustration to describe what Jesus did with Peter in the restoration and recommissioning: "What is important is that Peter reaffirms his love for the Lord, and is rehabilitated and recommissioned. The commission is a pastoral one. When first he was called from his occupation of catching fish to be a follower of Jesus, he was told that thenceforth he would catch men (Luke 5:10; cf. Mark 1:17). Now to the evangelist's hook there is added the pastor's crook, so that, as had often been said, Peter proceeded to fulfil his double commission "by hook and by crook." (Bruce, p. 405).

2. I think this "by hook and by crook" is an exciting theme. The crook is the shepherd's staff, sometimes called a crozier. In American English, the "crook" is a thief; but in pastoral societies, it is what someone would use to gather and protect animals, namely sheep. Every Christian is called to be a fisher of others, to find the right "hooks" of relationships that open doors to the human heart for the gospel. I also think that in a broad sense, every Christian is called to have a "crook," a way of touching the lives of others that demonstrates God's great love and care. This could be a powerful visual sermon with a fishing hook and a shepherd's staff to express our witness in the world.

3. Related to reaching the human heart, I recently heard a speaker observe that the English word "heart" begins with the four letters that spell "hear." To truly listen to someone, to "hear" what that person is saying, is the door that opens their heart.

4. The theme of "Follow Me" runs through this closing passage. In a sense, to follow Jesus is the path of overcoming our human frailties, weaknesses, and sinfulness. One might say that Peter was on a path of sanctification, a path that included the crisis of exposing his

vulnerabilities, yet led to a truth and grace-filled encounter. Notice that Peter did not run away in John 21 at the seashore. Peter accepted the penetrating words of Jesus, coming to the only conclusion there is: Follow Me.

5. To Follow Jesus is to move to a place where what Jesus does with others no longer concerns me. That does not mean we do not intercede, pray for, and have a relationship with others. Instead, it means that Jesus' purposes for them, however different they are for us, is a matter between them and Jesus. It is not the occasion for envy, jealousy, backbiting, resentment, bitterness, fighting for positions.

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