



## Part 78 – Greater Than You Can Imagine

### John 21:20-25

Considering the magisterial theology with which John begins his Gospel, the final words of his epilogue can seem a bit underwhelming by comparison. In fact, if we're not attentive, the closing section can seem a bit like tidying up loose ends. But in fact, there is so much more going on as John brings his extraordinary account to a close.

John completes his Gospel with a final exchange between Jesus and Peter along with mention of himself as the author, the one identified as “the disciple whom Jesus loved.” The focus throughout these closing words is on the disciple’s call to follow Jesus to the very end. The follower of Jesus is regularly tempted to turn away and look elsewhere. All too often we look to others. “Why has his life gone better than mine? Why have I experienced more calamity than my friends?” But Jesus will have us keep our eyes on him rather than envy the stories of other disciples.

John concludes by assuring his readers of the truthfulness of his eyewitness testimony, a theme which has appeared many times in his Gospel. But his final words are reserved for the One who has occupied his devotion since first becoming a disciple. Jesus, we are told, did many things that John did not record. Indeed, were an attempt made to record all that Jesus did and said there may not be sufficient paper in the world to meet the need. However glorious and powerful, holy and good, gracious and just Jesus is revealed to be in John’s Gospel, rest assured, he is even more.

### “Peter turned”

**Vs. 20** – After breakfast, Jesus and Peter continue their conversation as they walk along the shore of the Sea of Galilee. No doubt Peter is giving serious thought to Jesus’ words about his future death by crucifixion (21:18-19). He turns from Jesus to look at John who is following behind. Peter’s turning is meant to cause us to reflect on the nature of discipleship. “The language of ‘turning’ has played a significant role in the Gospel both at the beginning and end of Jesus’ ministry (1:38; 20:14-16). In both of those occurrences, the motion was theologically significant.” In the case of Peter, his turning “serves to depict for a final time in the Gospel, Peter’s misunderstanding regarding his calling and the Christian life.”<sup>1</sup> Having been commissioned and called to follow Jesus, he turns away for a moment.

- Jesus is the Object of preoccupation for the disciple. It’s not that we do not have a variety of legitimate responsibilities and concerns on any given day which rightly require our attention. Rather, to be a disciple means that whether we are going about our earthly vocation, tending to yardwork, crafting a budget, responding to a crisis, or spending time with friends, our chief concern is faithfulness to our Lord.

### “What about him?”

**Vs. 21** – When Peter noticed John following behind he asked Jesus, “What about him?” Having been told frighteningly sobering news that he would follow the Lord in crucifixion, Peter inquires about the fate of John. It’s not entirely clear whether Peter asks out of concern for John or with an attitude of comparison and rivalry. It seems to me that the context leans toward the latter. Peter has been given by Jesus a scary assignment. Will John’s discipleship carry the same heavy price?

- There seems to be an endless list of things that distract us from Jesus. Quite often our propensity to look over the shoulders of others is what catches us up. Certainly there are proper ways to be concerned about others. Indeed, part of our vocation as disciples of Jesus is to care about the welfare of our brothers and sisters in Christ. But all too often our watching takes the form of comparison and envy. “Why me and not him?” is a question, once asked, that can consume the soul with the distractions of self-pity and resentment.”<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Edward W. Klink, *John*, ECNT (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2016) p. 917

<sup>2</sup> Gordon Keddie, *John*, Vol. 2 (Leyland, England: Evangelical Press, 2001) p. 400

- God's plan for you will be different in many ways from his plans for others. Certainly, the most fundamental things we share in common. We have a common Lord, a common hope, and common baptism. We have a common command to love God and our neighbor. We have a common faith summarized in a common body of doctrine. But in terms of many of the circumstances of our lives, our various gifts, and the ways we serve in the church's ministry, we will differ in many ways. When those differences show themselves we must trust the goodness and wisdom of the Lord whose providence ultimately ends in his glory and our joy.

#### **"You follow me!"**

**Vs. 22** – Jesus restates his earlier call of "follow me," but adds the pronoun: "*You* follow me!" This directs Peter away from focusing all of his attention on a general call to "follow," and to focus instead on the way in which Jesus is calling him to be a disciple. Following Jesus is not a one-size-fits-all calling. As mentioned above, there are many things that all followers of Jesus will have in common. But the cost of discipleship will vary from disciple to disciple. Beyond our caring properly for one another, it is not our business what the Lord will call another disciple to bear in this life by way of comparison with our own path. Our call is to follow Jesus not compare burdens or blessings.

**Vs. 23** – Like a game of telephone, Jesus' words to Peter are rather quickly distorted and John goes about setting the record straight. Jesus did not in fact say that John would not die but that his fate was of no concern to Peter. Again, the lesson is that while care for one another is a virtue, comparison is a vice.

#### **"Not even the world itself"**

**Vs. 24** – John identifies himself as the author, the one identified as "the disciple whom Jesus loved." He does so primarily to publicly stand by every statement he has made as the result of his own eyewitness testimony. It has been John's ambition to recount the facts and pass along the truth and he places his own reputation on the line in order to do so.

**Vs. 25** – John pivots quickly to bring the focus back to Jesus. The central focus of his Gospel has been and must remain Jesus. The final word is not going to be about how John is a faithful witness. John will give the final word to Jesus, to the One to whom he has been bearing witness. John's prose is lovely here. If the prologue was magisterial, the final words of the epilogue are poetic.

- After all that is revealed concerning Jesus in this book, we have not begun to fathom all that Jesus has done and all that Jesus is for us who believe. Consider what we know of Jesus from John's Gospel: He is the Word, the Word made flesh, the only begotten Son, the Comforter, the King of the Jews, the Bread of Life, the Light of the world, the Door for the sheep, the Good Shepherd, the Resurrection and the Life, the Way, the Truth, and the Life, the True Vine, The I AM in flesh and bone, and in the words of Thomas, our Lord and our God. Jesus is greater than we can imagine. The world could not contain the library required if all of the Lord's great deeds and perfections were recorded. However good Jesus is revealed to be in John's written account, he is greater by far.
- John never set out to satisfy our curiosity but to call us to believe. He wrote his Gospel "that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in his name" (20:30). John's aim is that we would believe in Jesus and that through faith have life eternal and abundant. "Whoever believes in me," Jesus said, "will have everlasting life" (3:16).

*Could we with ink the oceans fill,  
And were the skies of parchment made;  
Were every tree on earth a quill,  
And every man a scribe by trade;  
To write the love of God above,  
Would drain the oceans dry;  
Nor could the scroll contain the whole,  
Though stretched from sky to sky.*

- From *The Love of God is Greater Far*, by Frederick Martin Lehman