

Although Chapter 20 forms an adequate end to the Book of John (so much so that some think John 21 is a later addition to the book), Chapter 21 adds some important contributions. First, it ties up the loose ends related to Jesus' relationship to Peter. Peter's death, which almost certainly occurred by the time John was written, is explained as the fulfillment of Jesus' prophetic word. The story shows that in some ways Jesus' relationship to His followers hasn't changed after the crucifixion; in particular, He still leads His followers and they are dependent upon Him. There is also written in symbolic form the mission of the church. In addition, there is no evidence of any copy of the Book of John that had circulated without chapter 21.

***21:1 After these things Jesus manifested Himself again to the disciples at the Sea of Tiberias, and He manifested Himself in this way.***

***21:2 Simon Peter, and Thomas called Didymus, and Nathanael of Cana in Galilee, and the sons of Zebedee, and two others of His disciples were together.***

***21:3 Simon Peter said to them, "I am going fishing." They said to him, "We will also come with you." They went out and got into the boat; and that night they caught nothing.***

***21:4 But when the day was now breaking, Jesus stood on the beach; yet the disciples did not know that it was Jesus.***

***21:5 So Jesus said to them, "Children, you do not have any fish, do you?" They answered Him, "No."***

***21:6 And He said to them, "Cast the net on the right-hand side of the boat and you will find a catch." So they cast, and then they were not able to haul it in because of the great number of fish.***

After the feast of Unleavened Bread, the disciples went back to Galilee and resumed their past profession of fishing, or at least fished on occasion to support themselves. They had not received any instruction on what to do next and so they didn't remain idle. Nevertheless, the events do not read as men empowered by a mission. As Carson points out, we would not expect to read anything like this in the Book of Acts (Carson, 670).

The story before us begins at the Sea of Tiberias (another name for the Sea of Galilee, see notes on 6:1) with Peter and six others getting into a boat and fishing while it was still dark. In ancient times fishing at night was preferred, for the fish that were caught could be sold early at the market while they were still fresh. In this case, they toiled all night long and had caught nothing.

Meanwhile, Jesus was on the shore watching them but the disciples did not recognize Him, either because they were kept from recognizing Him (Lk. 24:16, 37) or simply because it was too dark to see. After a whole night of failure, Jesus instructed them to throw the net on the other side of the boat. It was then that Jesus revealed Himself by means of the abundance of the catch.

This surely reminded Peter of the event recorded in Luke 5 that had made Peter a follower of Christ initially; we can be fairly certain that John intended for his readers to remember that incident as well. The story is as follows:

4 When He [Jesus] had finished speaking, He said to Simon, "Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch."

5 Simon answered and said, "Master, we worked hard all night and caught nothing, but I will do as You say and let down the nets."

6 When they had done this, they enclosed a great quantity of fish, and their nets began to break;

7 so they signaled to their partners in the other boat for them to come and help them. And they came and filled both of the boats, so that they began to sink.

8 But when Simon Peter saw that, he fell down at Jesus' feet, saying, "*Go away from me Lord, for I am a sinful man, O Lord!*"

9 For amazement had seized him and all his companions because of the catch of fish which they had taken;

10 and so also were James and John, sons of Zebedee, who were partners with Simon. And Jesus said to Simon, "***Do not fear, from now on you will be catching men.***"

11 When they had brought their boats to land, they left everything and followed Him.

It is an interesting note that there is no incident recorded in the gospels where the disciples caught any fish apart from Jesus' help. In this case, the amount of fish caught was beyond a typical catch, so much so that they were unable to even haul the net aboard the boat. As is common with Jesus' miracles, He does not give just the bare necessities, He gives an overabundance.

Jesus' disciples still needed to learn that without Him they could not even do what they knew how to do. In other words, fishing was one thing that Peter could do for himself. But Jesus wanted to teach Peter that dependence on Christ was not just reserved for the things he could not do, but that he, as a child of God and disciple of Christ, needed to depend on the Lord every moment of his life. At the same time, He was teaching that fishing was not their future, but that they would be fishing for men.

***21:7 Therefore that disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, "It is the Lord." So when Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he put his outer garment on (for he was stripped for work), and threw himself into the sea.***

***21:8 But the other disciples came in the little boat, for they were not far from the land, but about one hundred yards away, dragging the net full of fish.***

***21:9 So when they got out on the land, they saw a charcoal fire already laid and fish placed on it, and bread.***

***21:10 Jesus said to them, "Bring some of the fish which you have now caught."***

As was typical of other instances, the beloved disciple (John) shows spiritual discernment while Peter acts. Peter had taken off his outer coat so that he could have freedom of movement while working and was literally in Greek "naked," however, this could also mean he was "mostly naked" and had just been wearing a short tunic. When he heard that it was Jesus, he immediately put on his garment and jumped

in the water so he could swim to shore and greet Jesus properly dressed. The other disciples remained in the boat towing the fish ashore. They were about one hundred yards offshore.

When they arrived, they found that Jesus had already lit a fire and was cooking some fish. Verse 9 points out that they saw the charcoal fire, which plays into the rest of the events as we shall soon see.

Jesus did not need them to provide for Him, rather He provided for them, but He added to the meal some of the fish that He had provided for the disciples to catch – “Jesus both enables His followers and then uses what they procure” (Kostenberger, 592). He continues to serve His followers even after He had risen; “for even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve. . .” ( Mk. 10:45).

***21:11 Simon Peter went up and drew the net to land, full of large fish, a hundred and fifty-three; and although there were so many, the net was not torn.***

***21:12 Jesus said to them, "Come and have breakfast." None of the disciples ventured to question Him, "Who are You?" knowing that it was the Lord.***

***21:13 Jesus came and took the bread and gave it to them, and the fish likewise.***

***21:14 This is now the third time that Jesus was manifested to the disciples, after He was raised from the dead.***

Peter dragged the net ashore by himself demonstrating that he was a physically strong man, for the net had a hundred and fifty-three large fish in it. The mention that the net was not torn suggests divine intervention; under normal circumstances, a catch of that weight would have torn the net.

First century Jews normally ate two meals a day. Jesus acts as the host and offers them refreshment and nourishment. When He called no one asked who He was (literally, no one dared ask Him who He was) for they knew it was the Lord; that is, they wanted to ask Him “Is it really You?” but they dared not do so. Though they longed to be with their Master, the disciples appeared to be considerably uneasy in approaching Him and had to be invited to eat.

This was the third time that Jesus had appeared to the disciples after the resurrection. John’s mention of this indicates that it was more evidence that Jesus had risen from the dead. The “third time” is probably referencing the third time in the book (not including Mary; Carson, 675).

The identity of the body in which Christ rose with that which expired upon the cross, was proved by indubitable evidence. It retained even the print of the nails which had pierced his hands and his feet. Nevertheless it was changed. To what extent, however, is not clearly made known. The facts recorded in the sacred history bearing on the nature of the Lord’s body during the period between his resurrection and ascension are, (a.) That it was not at first clearly recognized as the same. Mary Magdalene mistook Him for the gardener. (John 20:15.) The two disciples whom He joined on their way to Emmaus, did not recognize Him until He was made known to them in the breaking of bread. (Luke 24:31.) When He appeared to the disciples on the shore of the Sea of Tiberias they did not know who He was, until the miraculous draft of fishes taken at his

command revealed Him. (John 11:7.) (b.) It appeared suddenly in the midst of his disciples in a room of which the doors were shut. (John 20:19, and Luke 24:36.) (c.) Nevertheless, it was the same material body having "flesh and bones." That the appearance recorded in Luke 24:36 was preternatural may be inferred from the effect which it produced upon the disciples: "They were terrified and affrighted, and supposed that they had seen a spirit." Our Lord reassured them saying, "Behold my hands and my feet, that it is I myself: handle me, and see; for a spirit hath not flesh and bones as ye see me have." It appears from the transfiguration of Christ that his body while here on earth was capable of passing from one state to another without losing its identity (Hodge, Systematic Theology, II, 627, 628).

### ***John 21:15-23***

In verses 15-23 there is a bit of a déjà vu with the charcoal fire and three questions regarding Peter's stance toward Jesus. A similar scene appeared in John 18:18-27 where Peter stood before a charcoal fire and was asked three times if he was Jesus' disciple; this time his response is markedly different (Kostenberger, 595).

In Christ's treatment of the Apostle, we have a revelation of how He behaves to someone conscious of his fault; and in Peter's demeanor, an illustration of how someone conscious of his fault should behave to Him.

"Peter was conscious that he had incurred his Master's displeasure, and could expect to be reproved for his treachery and ingratitude. He most likely had doubts about his standing with his Master; sometimes hoping for the best, because he had received favor from Him with the rest; yet not without some reservations. But now, at length, his Master put him out of his pain, said what he had to say to him, and confirmed him in his place as an apostle. . . . Peter had grieved deeply over his betrayal, and therefore Christ did not rebuke him, nor speak of it directly, but was satisfied with his repentance. The offence was not only forgiven, but forgotten; and Christ let him know that he was as dear to him as ever. Herein He has given us an encouraging instance of His tenderness towards those who feel sorrow over their sin, and has taught us, in like manner, to restore people like him with a spirit of meekness" (author unknown).

***21:15 So 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, "Tend My lambs."***

We are probably to gather from verse 20 that after breakfast Jesus took Peter for a short walk (Bruce, 404). He came to do a work of reconciliation. He does not hurry, but takes His time to make the restoration complete.

"Do you love Me *more than these?*" could mean:

1) Do you love Me **more than the other disciples love Me**? Peter had earlier professed greater devotion than the other disciples (Matt. 26:33; Mk. 14:29; Jn. 13:37; 15:12f.). In John 13:37-38 he said to Christ, "Lord, why can I not follow You right now? I will lay down my life for You." In light of his denial, does he still feel that his devotion to Christ is superior to the others? (Morris, 870)

2) Do you love Me **more than you love your fellow disciples**? Peter had 3 times denied Jesus so his devotion was suspect, but he had remained with his friends and went back to fishing; where did his real affections lie? With his companions or with Jesus whom he had denied? (Morris, 870). Peter's actions had shown that he did not want a crucified Lord. Jesus had been crucified, now where did his affections lie? (Morris, 871).

3) Do you love me **more than these things**? The "things" represented Peter's whole way of life. Jesus is questioning him about his whole future. Did he want to resort back to his old life, or was he committed to Christ?

The first view sounds possible until Peter responds "Yes Lord." If Jesus was challenging Peter's appraisal of his love for Christ in comparison to the other disciples, Peter still thinks that his love for Him is greater than theirs. The second view makes a little more sense; Peter had denied Christ but not his fellow disciples. He was now fishing with them. Jesus wanted to know where He stood in relation to everyone else. Lastly, Peter had returned to fishing. Was he now willing to give that up to be a fisher of men? Does he love Jesus more than what he was doing? This has problems, too, in that the other disciples were fishing as well. Why single out Peter? No matter which view is intended, the primary idea is that Peter must love Jesus supremely. The one who loves Jesus will love those who are entrusted to their charge. This is not evidence for Peter's primacy over the others as Catholic interpreters see it. Peter spoke of himself as a "fellow elder," one among many, who are entrusted with the care of God's flock (1 Pet. 5:1-2).

There are two different words for love found in this passage: *ἀγαπάω* (*agapao* - primarily used of Christian love or God's love for His people) and *φιλέω* (*phileo* - a love that is a deep feeling for someone, - perhaps indicating a "liking" or a fond natural affection). In the first two questions Jesus uses the word *agapao* (*ἀγαπάω*), to which Peter responds with the word *phileo* (*φιλέω*). In the third question Jesus uses Peter's word *phileo* (*φιλέω*) and Peter responds by using it there as well. This has resulted in quite a discussion among commentators.

1. Some see Jesus asking if Peter has a profound love for him, but Peter, not daring to claim so much after his betrayal, is not willing to use such a high expression of himself. Therefore, he replies that he is fond of Jesus. Then finally, in the third question Jesus descends to Peter's level.

2. Some commentators reverse the ideas in the above view, saying that from Peter's perspective Jesus is using a word that is too cold to express the pent-up emotion that he was then feeling, so Peter responds with a word that more concretely expresses that deep affection he had for Christ in his heart. Then, in the last question, the Lord encourages the love he sees by rising to Peter's word.

3. The third view is that the change in vocabulary is not as significant. They are nearly synonymous.

Although it is tempting to see some type of contrast in these two words, there is more evidence (in my opinion) to show that no significant change of meaning is intended (see the note at the end of this paper for some pros and cons of each view).

**21:16 He said to him again 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, "Shepherd My sheep."**

"Shepherd" is a broader term than feed. In verse 15 "sheep" (ἀρνίον *arnion*) is a diminutive meaning little sheep or lambs. In verses 16 and 17 a different word for sheep (προβάτιον *probaton*) is used, but most treat them as synonymous.

**21:17 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 all things; You know that I love You." Jesus said to him, "Tend My sheep."**

Peter was grieved because he was asked the same question three times. Repentance always involves the painful process of getting back to where we started with the Lord. When someone is restored, they realize that the pain of restoration is necessary. Pain and grief results in permanent change.

Once again, Peter relies on the intimate knowledge of the Lord. "Lord, You know all things; You know that I love You." Peter was sure that Christ knew all things, and particularly that He knew the heart, and was a discerner of the thoughts and intents of it. Peter was satisfied that Christ, who knew all things, knew the sincerity of his love to him, and would be ready to attest it in his favor. "It is a terror to a hypocrite to think that Christ knows all things; for the divine omniscience will be a witness against him. But it is a comfort to a sincere Christian that he has that to appeal to: My witness is in heaven, my record is on high. Christ knows us better than we know ourselves. Though we know not our own uprightness, He knows it" (author unknown).

There is no doubt that the scene is meant to convey that Peter was completely restored to leadership. He had denied the Lord three times, and now he was asked to affirm his love for Him three times; three times he had also been commissioned to care for the flock. (Morris, 875; Carson, 678) Peter's ministry is described in the verbs "tend" and "feed", but the sheep are Christ's sheep, not Peter's. A similar emphasis is found in Acts 20:28 where overseers are told "to *shepherd the church of God* which He purchased with His own blood."

Prior to being given the position, love is required. This is the basic qualification for Christian service. Other qualities may be desirable, but love is indispensable (I Cor. 13:1-3) (Morris, 875).

That Peter took his commission seriously is seen in I Peter 5:1-4 where he writes:

1 Therefore, I exhort the elders among you, as your fellow elder and witness of the sufferings of Christ, and a partaker also of the glory that is to be revealed,

2 *shepherd the flock of God* among you, exercising oversight not under compulsion, but voluntarily, according to the will of God; and not for sordid gain, but with eagerness;

3 nor yet as lording it over those allotted to your charge, but proving to be examples to the flock.

4 And *when the Chief Shepherd appears*, you will receive the unfading crown of glory.

**21:18 "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."**

**21:19 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!"**

The commission to Peter is followed by a prophecy that will result in proof that Peter does love Christ. When he was young he could fasten his belt and go where he wanted –in old age he will do neither – he will be restrained and no longer be the master of his movements. This cryptic comment could be taken to refer to his inabilities experienced by old age, but in the next verse (19) it is clear that this signified how he would die. Jesus had glorified God through death, so would Peter. The present tense “follow Me” may be significant – “Keep on following Me.” – He was no longer to waiver, but follow Him consistently (Morris, 876). “He had once forsaken Christ through fear of death. Now, with a prospect of violent death before him, he is bidden to resume the Master’s work and to follow Him. He did this, from this time, faithfully and gloriously, whether threatened by the Jewish Sanhedrim, in prison, or dying as a martyr on the cross.” It must have brought great joy to Peter to know that in the end he would be faithful to Christ.

In 1 Peter 1:5-9, Peter encouraged others by saying that we “are protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.” He said, “ In this you greatly rejoice, even though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been distressed by various trials, so that the proof of your faith, being more precious than gold which is perishable, even though tested by fire, may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ; and though you have not seen Him, you love Him, and though you do not see Him now, but believe in Him, you greatly rejoice with joy inexpressible and full of glory, obtaining as the outcome of your faith the salvation of your souls.”

“As Christ foresaw all his own sufferings, so he foresaw the sufferings of all his followers, and foretold them, though not in particular, as to Peter, yet in general, that they must take up their cross. Having charged him to feed His sheep, he bids him not to expect ease and honor in it, but trouble and persecution, and to suffer ill for doing well.”

***21:20 Peter, turning around, saw the disciple whom Jesus loved following them; the one who also had leaned back on His bosom at the supper and said, "Lord, who is the one who betrays You?"***

***21:21 So Peter seeing him said to Jesus, "Lord, and what about this man?"***

***21:22 Jesus said to him, "If I want him to remain until I come, what is that to you? You follow Me!"***

Peter, seeing John, inquires about his future. Surely the disciple whom Jesus loved would have a special mission or death (Bruce, 407). Jesus denies him satisfaction of his curiosity – he has no business knowing what will happen to John, as we have no business in knowing the Lord's plans for others. If Jesus wants him to live until He returns, that is no concern of Peter. Peter's concern is simply to follow. This should be our only concern as well.

***21:23 Therefore this saying went out among the brethren that that disciple would not die; 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?"***

Jesus' comment in verse 22 could be understood as meaning that John would not die until Jesus returned. John, therefore, interjects a commentary to explain an error that had arisen that stated that John would never die. John makes it clear that Jesus did not say he would not die, rather, all He said was if He wanted John to live until Jesus returned, that was no concern of Peter. All he needed to do was keep his eyes on Jesus and follow Him.

***21:24 This is the disciple who is testifying to these things and wrote these things, and we know that his testimony is true.***

***21:25 And there are also many other things which Jesus did, which if they were written in detail, I suppose that even the world itself would not contain the books that would be written.***

Here John reveals himself to be "the disciple" who appears unnamed in many places in the book.

The Book of John contains only a fraction of what John had experienced and he speculates that had he written it everything down, the world itself could not contain it.

If you have read the entire gospel and are saddened that it is now at an end, these last two verses are wonderful news. The fact is, our learning about Christ never comes to an end. The book of John is just the beginning of our future in knowing Him. As with John, someday if we were given opportunity to write all that we come to know, not even the world could contain all the books we could write!

**NOTE ON THE WORDS FOR LOVE IN JOHN 21.**

PROS and CONS for views 1 and 2.

**VIEW 1:** Jesus is asking if Peter has a profound love for Him. Peter, not daring to claim so much after his betrayal, is not willing to use such a high expression of himself.

**VIEW 2:** Jesus is using a word that is too cold to express the pent-up emotion that Peter was then feeling, so Peter responds with a word that more concretely expresses that deep affection he had for Christ in his heart. Then, in the last question the Lord rises to Peter's word.

## PRO

1. The two words, being repeated many times in a few verses stand out. Surely there is some reason for using two different words. If there are two different words, the differences in meaning cannot be identical. (But see Con 8 below).

## CON

1. The precise difference between these two is not easy to discern; both views 1 and 2 (which are opposite each other) are held by competent interpreters (Morris, 873). Even if a difference is intended, what is the intention of the difference?

2.\* John often uses different words as synonyms without any emphasis of focusing on the nuances (Morris, 873). Even in this brief story, there are two words for tending the flock, two words for sheep, and two words for "know" (Bruce, 404); these other pairs have not stirred people's imaginations, so it is hard to see why the two words for love should (Carson, 677).

3.\* There is no reason based on John's usage of the words to suspect two different meanings (Morris, 873); John uses the two words interchangeably - agapao (ἀγαπάω) 3:35; phileo (φιλέω) 5:20; 11:5, 36; also in reference to John - agapao (ἀγαπάω) 13:23; 19:26; 21:7, 20, phileo (φιλέω) 20:2 (Bruce, 405).

4. Assuming that the original conversation was in Aramaic, the choice of words would have been John's rather than that of the original conversation (Morris, 873)

BUT: All we have is the inspired text, so through word usage John could have been making a distinction that was intended though not spoken (TK)

5.\*\* Peter's answer, "Yes Lord," sounds like he is affirming that he loves Jesus in the way that Jesus is asking. Why would he say "Yes" if he meant "No"? He is accepting Jesus' word, not declining it (Morris, 873).

6. In the LXX both words are used to translate a single Hebrew word (Bruce, 405)

7. Agapao (Ἀγαπάω) does not always express a loftier type of love. In II Timothy 4:10 Demas's regrettable love for the world is expressed by agapao (ἀγαπάω) (Bruce, 405). In the fourth century the verb agapao (ἀγαπάω) was coming into prominence as the standard word for love, partly because phileo (φιλέω) was taking on the additional meaning of "to kiss" in some contexts. In other words, agapao (ἀγαπάω) is not strictly a religious word (Carson, 676, 677).

8.\*\* Although the words are synonyms, it is agreed that they have differences of nuance, association, and emotional coloring within their total semantic range. But within one passage this does not amount to a theological distinction or specify a kind of love referred to (Carson, 677).

**VIEW 3:** The change in vocabulary is not as significant.

PRO

1. In light of the above cons, it is simplest to see this as a variation with no significant meaning (Morris, 873).

CON

2. If it is not significant, why use two different words?