

# John 21

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Preacher: Reuben Hunter

[ 0 : 00 ] Please open up John 21 that was read for us a bit earlier on page 907 in the church Bibles. John 21. When you think of all the things that the once dead, now raised to life, living Lord Jesus Christ, could give to you.

You're in His presence and you think to yourself, what would I like Him to give me? Barbecued fish probably isn't top of the list. Barbecued fish for breakfast.

I know it's traditional, kippers and kedgery and all that kind of thing, but fish for breakfast? I wouldn't go for that. Nor would I think, do you know what, I'd love a really awkward conversation with Him that made me feel very uncomfortable.

You may have life. And it's the life that John has been showing all the way through his gospel, the life that is truly life.

Life in relationship with the God who made you, the God who made heaven and earth, the God who makes sense of everything. You can have this life in Jesus Christ. And you think, it's amazing. Let's pray. Let's finish the story there.

[ 1 : 47 ] No. There's another appearance, chapter 21. Jesus appears again. It happens when His disciples are having a bad day on the water. And He turns up and He helps them catch a load of fish, but then He gives them fish for breakfast.

And He has this really awkward one-to-one exchange with Peter. Is that really how the story ends? Well, no, it's not. But it is how the Gospel of John ends. That is, it is the point, the point I should say of this epilogue is to say that the story of Jesus at work in the world doesn't end with His resurrection appearances and the statement that you can have eternal life in Him.

It ends saying that His works continue through the disciples. Look down at verse 23, through the disciples until He comes again. You see, John introduced his gospel, if you remember, a year ago. It seems like a very long time.

John introduced this gospel with a prologue that lifted our gaze from the here and now, lifted our gaze to the One who was with God and was God and is God, the Eternal Son.

The One who took on flesh and dwelt among us, the One whose glory we have seen through the pages of this gospel. And now John provides an epilogue. Having lifted us with the prologue, he lands us with the epilogue that focuses on the ongoing work of Jesus in the world.

[ 3 : 15 ] We lift our eyes to the One, the Eternal Son, and then we bring our eyes back down to earth and see how the reality of that works its way out in the here and now. So the ending is more of a hinge than a conclusion. It closes the story of the life of Jesus on earth and it opens the story of His ongoing ministry in the Spirit through the disciples and then through the church.

The fish for breakfast, the uncomfortable chat, they're the doorway to something much more significant. And we know this because of the way John organizes his material. He puts the story of this miraculous catch of fish and the feeding of the disciples beside the exchange between Peter and Jesus.

And putting them beside each other, it's as if John is saying, well, he often does this. He describes an event and then interprets the meaning of that event and what he records next. We saw that back when Jesus washed the disciples' feet.

Do you remember? He washes the disciples' feet and you think to yourself, what on earth is this all about? What's going on here? And then he records what Jesus says immediately after that to explain how the washing of the feet is a picture of the cleansing from sin that His death will bring for those who are His.

So we've got the events described and we've got the interpretation of the events. It's the same here. The miraculous catch of fish and the feeding of the disciples is about ministry. It's about the work

that Simon Peter is being restored to that Jesus has done with him just after the miraculous catch of fish.

[ 4 : 52 ] The fish is a symbolic enactment of the role of the church in the post-resurrection era. All that's going on with the fish is about what we're all caught up in now as the church of the Lord Jesus.

So that's what I want to work through. We've got three points. Regarding the church, John wants, first of all, to depict her mission. To depict her mission. Depict the church's mission.

So Jesus, 20, has just commissioned the disciples in 20 verse 19 and following. He's promised them His peace. You remember? We heard about that last week. He's promised them His Spirit and He's given them authority to forgive sins.

But the start of chapter 21, they've decided to return to what they know. See, when Simon Peter says, I'm going fishing. Well, they're fishermen.

That's what they know. Simon Peter, Thomas called the twin, Nathaniel of Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee and two others. All of his disciples were together. Simon Peter said to them, I'm going fishing.

[ 5 : 51 ] They said to him, we'll go with you. Now, was this disobedience? Were they just choosing their old lives?

Had they been commissioned by Christ to go and live for Him? And they then say, do you know what? Actually, I'm going to do what was familiar. I'm just going to drift back into all that was familiar. Well, perhaps that's the case, certainly given that John refers in verse 3 to it being night. In John's gospel, that isn't just a time marker. It always has negative connotations. So, it's perhaps likely that they were doing that, that they were just returning to what was familiar, giving up and returning to their old lives.

They certainly, what is clear is they certainly are unclear about what their relationship with Jesus entails. What their part in the life of God involves.

They don't get the nature of their commission. Hence, the fruitless night on the water. But then Jesus turns up. I'm going fishing.

[ 6 : 52 ] We'll go with you. Off they go. And then Jesus turns up. And because when He first called them, if you remember in the Synoptic Gospels, He told them that He would make them fishers of men.

He brought them from their life as fishermen going into the water and catching real fish to make them fishers of men. To bring people to know the Lord Jesus, He takes the opportunity to draw out the fishing metaphor to depict their mission and the church's mission.

Put simply, their mission is to draw people to Christ. That is what He has given them. His peace and His spirit and the authority to forgive sins to go and do.

To draw people to Christ. And that is the mission of the church. Every church since this event. So the details then that John gives. Flesh this out a bit.

Develop what it entails for the church. The mission of the church to be to draw people to Christ. First of which is this. The mission will be, firstly, pointless without Jesus.

[ 7 : 57 ] Verses 3 to 6. Pointless without Jesus. The story starts with a picture of failure. Verse 3. A wasted trip.

A waste of all their time and all their effort. It is only when Jesus calls out to them, Children, do you have any fish? That their fortunes begin to change.

And then when they follow His instruction, put the net where He told them to put it, they pull in their catch. John here is pressing us to see that apart from Jesus' presence and His direction and His power, that is His presence with them, His direction as to what to do, and power to accomplish the task, their efforts come to nothing.

And it's exactly the same with the mission of the church. Our efforts to draw people to Jesus are just as dependent on the miraculous, just as dependent on the supernatural, as this catch of fish.

Nobody believes in the Lord Jesus unless the Lord Jesus does a miracle in their heart. So our efforts cannot and will not succeed without the presence and the leading of Christ, without the animating power of God at work.

[ 9 : 20 ] So how do we get that? How do we get the presence and leading of Christ? How do we get the animating power of God? We ask for them. We depend on them.

A church's mission rests on the prayer meeting and on the prayerfulness of her ministers. Dependence on the Lord Jesus, the only one who can bring the fish in. It's true. With a bit of natural ability, with a few quid and with some gifting, you can create something that looks like a church. And basic human dynamics mean that you can also gather a crowd and you can make it look like God is at work. And you can do it all in the power of the flesh. You can do it all in your own strength and all in the talent of the people that are involved. All in the natural. But there's no power. If people will be drawn to Christ and submitted fully to Him, we need Him to work. You can't manufacture that.

[ 10 : 22 ] And if He will work, we need to ask and we need to seek and we need to knock. The mission of the church is pointless without Jesus and the big application for us is that we must be prayerful people.

Prayerful ministers, prayerful congregations, dependent on the Lord, that He might work in power. Listening to His leading and His direction through His Word and relying on Him by the power of His Spirit to be at work amongst us.

Pointless without Jesus. But then, if we do all those things, if we do depend on Him, and if He is at work, look at what happens, verse 5. The catch is enormous.

Indeed, this plays into the second aspect of the mission. It is fruitful with Jesus. Pointless without Jesus, fruitful with Jesus. That's verses 10 and 11. The disciples come to shore.

The charcoal fire has the fish and bread already grilling. I'm sure Peter will have caught the unmistakable whiff of the charcoal before he gets to land. A terrible reminder of past failures.

[ 11 : 28 ] But it's what Jesus says next that's so interesting. Verse 10, Bring some of the fish that you have caught, that you have just caught. So Simon Peter went aboard and hauled the net ashore, full of large fish, 153 of them.

And although there were so many, the net was not torn. Now the disciples here, they know as well as anyone that they didn't catch the fish. Jesus, the Lord of the seas, drew the fish into the net. But do you see, Jesus describes it as their catch. Bring some of the fish that you have just caught. And you see, Jesus had no need for their fish because we're told that He already has His own fish cooking on the fire.

So what's going on? Well, Jesus is demonstrating how while the mission is pointless without Him, He involves us in the work. In that sense, it's a partnership.

It's not an equal partnership, obviously. But the church that starts with prayer then goes about the work that Jesus calls us to. We go about drawing people to Christ.

[ 12 : 37 ] And don't miss what we're told here with the size of the hall. The fact that the nets aren't breaking, the fact that there's a size of a catch that they can hardly manage to get ashore in their own strength.

And then this enigmatic number, 153 of them. Now there are plenty of interpretations of what the 153 is. Some say it's just the number of fish. There were just 153 of them.

The church father, Jerome, suggests that there are 153 kinds of fish in the world. And the number represents the fullness of every kind of person in the world. Another view is that the number is an allusion to the 153,000 workers assigned to build Solomon's temple in 1 Kings 5.

You have to hold the text at an angle and sort of look along it to see that. But that's there. And he's saying that points to the building of the church. The great Augustine suggests that it is the sum of natural numbers from 1 to 17, which is a significant biblical number, again speaking of fullness. Still another has to do with the numerical value assigned to the Greek letters used in the words sign, believe, Christ, life. Big words in John's gospel. Take your pick.

[ 13 : 50 ] What is clear is that the number relates to the wider point of the paragraph, and that is the massive size of the catch. One commentator says this, the number symbolizes the magnitude of the Christian church and the comprehensive nature of its mission.

The magnitude of the Christian church and the comprehensive nature of its mission. The promise of this passage is that the mission of the church will be fruitful.

God will accomplish His plans. The gospel will spread through history like yeast in a loaf, like a mustard seed growing to the biggest tree in the forest. The earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.

The size of the catch here should fill us with confidence, particularly in our day. In a day where our Christian heritage is being dismantled, even though we need to prepare our children for harder days than we've had for following Christ, the faithful will endure.

The darkness will lift. The mission of the church in history will be massively fruitful. Be encouraged. The ground, you could say, of the mission is dependence on Christ.

[15:10] The nature of the mission is partnership with Christ. As the disciples then come ashore, we see the goal of the mission. The goal of the mission is participation in Jesus. Verses 12 to 13.

Look at verse 12. Jesus said to them, Come and have breakfast. Now none of the disciples dared ask him, Who are you? They knew it was the Lord. Jesus came and took the bread and gave it to them, and so with the fish.

This is the life of the church. This is the point of her existence, that men and women, boys and girls, participate in the presence of Christ.

That's the symbolic significance of the meal. Jesus invites them, and they come to be fed by Him and to participate with Him in this divinely instituted gathering.

That's what's going on, isn't it? He calls them into His presence, and they come and are fed by Him and participate with Him in this gathering. Now the allusions to the Lord's Supper are obviously clear.

[16:16] It's a sacred meal in which we participate with the risen Lord Jesus. The Apostle Paul uses that word in 1 Corinthians when he talks about eating and drinking at the Lord's table as a participation in Christ.

That's what happens by the Holy Spirit. The allusions to the supper are clear, but this is also the case. This participation is also the case when we gather, like we have done this morning, on the Lord's Day for worship.

We are participating in the life of Christ. Jesus tells us when two or three are gathered in His name, He is there present. That means He is present here, now, with us, in this moment, in a way that He is not present at other times and in other places.

We encounter the presence of the living Christ by His Spirit in the worship and ministry of the church. That is why this is the most important time in your week.

This is why we need to be here. There is nowhere else on earth that you can be than gathered with the saints of God on the Lord's Day where God is at work by the power of His Spirit.

[17:44] This is where He is. It's not to say that He isn't in other contexts at different times, but this is where He has promised to do that work. And so we want to be here, but we also want to call our friends and our neighbors and the nations to be here as well.

Fish for breakfast? No thanks. Being in the presence of the risen Christ? Yes, please. John depicts the church's mission.

He continues then. And secondly, he defines the work of her ministers, defines the work of the church's ministers. I feel for Peter.

It's another charcoal fire, the memories of denying Jesus. And now Jesus turns, verse 15, and looks him in the eye. 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.

[18:50] He said to him, Tend my sheep. He said to him a 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. Simon, son of John, So, just in case there were any other Simons around that could have heard, he's making it clear.

I'm talking to you, Simon Peter, not anyone else. Three questions that mirror Peter's three denials. Three answers showing his repentance and recommitment to follow Jesus as Lord.

Lord, you know. Lord, yes, Lord. Lord, now this is ground zero, not just for Peter and these foundational apostles, but for every minister of the gospel.

We all need the grace and forgiveness that Jesus offers. No minister can claim to be without sin, and no minister should be treated or expected to behave as if that were the case. We all need the grace of Christ moment by moment for life and ministry.

[ 19 : 59 ] But this exchange also shows us what it is that Jesus requires of ministers. Do you love me? Feed my sheep.

Any faithful minister must love the Lord Jesus. That is, they must love the Lord Jesus more than anything else, more than their reputation, more than their own comfort, their own professional success, their own friends.

Peter denied Jesus for his own comfort out of fear. Therefore, he showed him, he showed that he loved himself more than he loved Jesus. A minister must love Jesus above all of these.

That's what Jesus demands. He's saying, do you love me? If you're looking for a minister, a faithful minister of the gospel, you've got to see that they love Jesus more than anything else.

because only then will they truly be able to do the second part of what he expects and that is, feed his sheep. Do you see there when Jesus says, feed my sheep?

[ 21 : 07 ] He is retaining ownership. The sheep that ministers feed are not their sheep. They still belong to the Lord Jesus.

And that is why loving him is so important for a minister. You are Christ's sheep. Nobody else has any claim on you as their sheep.

You belong to Christ and that is why we love Christ as ministers of the gospel as a priority so that we will do what he calls us to do in caring for you. If you know, if someone you know entrusts something of theirs to your care, you are more careful with it than you are with your own things.

And then if you love that person because of your love for them, you are especially careful with what it is that they have entrusted to you. It is the same with the sheep of the Lord Jesus and those that he has entrusted to a minister's care.

We shepherd the sheep of the good shepherd. And we love and care for them primarily because we love him. That is what motivates the ministers of this church.

[ 22 : 21 ] It is a love for Christ that causes us to feed you, to care for you, to shepherd you. And of course, the way that we do that primarily is by feeding you the word of God.

That is the minister's primary task. Opening the word of God, saying what it says, not what we might like it to say, and calling people to follow it wherever it takes us, not where we might like it to take us.

And doing that consistently, in season and out of season, Sunday by Sunday, meeting by meeting. Jesus depicts the mission of the church as drawing people to him.

The way that this happens is through the church's ministers loving Christ and feeding the sheep with God's word. And then Jesus explains how the church is to respond. And thirdly, he describes her manner.

He describes the church's manner. He depicts her mission. He defines the work of her ministers. And he describes her manner. Verse 22. It's summed up in a single phrase.

[ 23 : 25 ] It's actually repeated twice. 19, follow me. 22, you follow me. Jesus moves between addressing Peter as an apostle here, like in verse 18, when he informs him of how his apostolic ministry will end and addressing him really as a model disciple.

He's saying Peter must follow through on his earlier claims and follow Jesus no matter what. So the manner or the posture of the Christian church is very clear.

Do you see it? We follow Jesus. Peter wants to ask about others. Verse 20. He looks around.

What's going to happen to this guy? Jesus says, don't worry.

Don't worry. Don't worry about anyone else. You follow me. So we could say that the manner of the Christian church is to follow Jesus, but we have to do that ourselves.

You follow Jesus. It's an individual thing we all have responsibility to do. Those who love the Lord Jesus follow him with all that that entails. To follow Jesus doesn't just mean that we follow his mere commands, although that is obviously key, but that we follow his pattern of life.

[ 24 : 41 ] When he calls the disciple, Jesus says, take up your cross and follow me. In Luke's gospel, he says, take up your cross daily and follow me. That is, we are to adopt the same self-denial and cross-shaped pattern of life that marked the Lord Jesus Christ.

That is what it means to love him. self-denial and obedience to his commands. You follow me.

So, let's think about what that means. Let's be somewhat specific. Boys and girls, boys and girls, can you look up for a moment? When you find mom and dad's instructions difficult, when you find obedience in the home hard, what's Jesus saying here?

He's saying, you follow Christ. And you do what they say. You honor their authority as he has called you to do. Older teens, when you feel the pressure to go with the culture, to follow your friends, to wander off into sin and the sorts of things that they want to pursue, you follow Christ.

You say no. You be an outlier. It's hard. It's hard. But that's what Jesus calls you to. That's actually, in the moment, it's hard, but that is actually the pathway to life that is truly life.

[ 26 : 10 ] When it comes to relationships, you follow Christ. You only choose Christians, and you treat them as a brother or a sister until you marry, and you don't mess with them emotionally. When it comes to marriage and family, you order the home according to God's Word with the Father in charge, and you raise your children according to God's Word, and where the state tells you that you can't do that, guess what?

You follow Christ. When you're told to define your pronouns, or wear the lanyard, or celebrate the cause, you follow Christ, and you say no.

When promotion means that you won't be around to lead your family, or raise your children as you should, you follow Christ, and you accept another role.

When you're planning retirement, you follow Christ. You ensure that those plans involve healthy patterns of worship and service in the life of a good church.

This is the church's manner. We follow Christ. For generations, following Christ really didn't cost us a huge amount in the culture. It's getting much, much more difficult now, and boys and girls, your generation, it's going to be harder still, but we follow Christ.

[ 27 : 28 ] We take Him at His Word, and we trust Him. If we say we love Jesus, we follow Him wherever He leads us, no matter what. And so this is where John brings us into land, following Jesus.

You follow me. He's the one at the center of John's testimony, a testimony that He's written to give us confidence, confidence of the truth of this gospel.

And when John says, verse 24, that his testimony about Jesus is true, he's not just saying, it's true, you can look under a microscope and see that all this stuff is true. He's saying, no, this is an invitation to participate in the ongoing work of Christ in the world through the church.

It's not about barbecued fish for breakfast. It's not about awkward conversations. It's about a mission that will triumph. A mission that will triumph.

And so whatever the cost, we can follow with confidence and hope. And we can know that in Christ we have life that is truly life.

[ 28 : 38 ] Let's pray. Amen.