

Notes for the Ones Called-Out to Meet

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John 21:1-25 -- The Risen Jesus By The Sea

by Dan Trygg

“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.’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.’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.’”

John 21:15-17

Another example of an incident recorded only by John, this very sensitive and important account of Jesus’ restoration of Peter offers great insight into God’s love for imperfect people.

The Setting (21:1-4). Seven of Jesus’ disciples go fishing on the Sea of Galilee, at Peter’s suggestion (cf. 6:1). They fish all night, but catch nothing. In the morning, a man (Jesus) was standing on the beach:

“*Children, you do not have anything to eat with bread, do you?*” (vs. 5) The word, “children”, was a common word for a child, servant or slave. It implied “**one under training**”. The word translated as “fish” in many versions refers to “something eaten with bread”, usually relish or fish. The question in Greek implies that a negative answer is expected by the inquirer. This is kind of odd, unless you realize who is doing the asking. Normally, you would expect that a crew of seven men who were fishing all night *would have* caught at least enough for breakfast!

“*Cast on the right side of the boat...*” (vs. 6). -- An odd request, but they had experienced success before in a similar situation (Lk. 5:1-11). In fact, that occasion was the last time they had gone fishing together as professional fishermen, having left their nets to follow Jesus after that experience. **Here they were, attempting to return to a way of life which they had left behind in order to follow their Master, ...and He shows up again to re-issue His call!**

“*So they cast, ...and were not able to haul it in, because of the great number of fish.*” -- Again, sounds familiar (Luke 5:6-9). “*Therefore the disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, ‘It is the Lord.’*” (vs. 7) John recognized the parallel, and could come to no other conclusion. “*...Peter... threw himself into the sea...*” -- Peter could not wait for the boat to come ashore, so, putting his garment on, he swam to shore. This was very characteristic of Peter’s impulsivity. “*The other disciples came in the boat..., dragging the net of fish*” (vs. 8).

“*...they saw a charcoal fire already laid and fish placed on it, and bread.*” (vs. 9) -- They were surprised to see that breakfast was nearly already prepared. The meal was the proper setting for what Jesus intended to do. It offered a time for them to unwind and get comfortable, ...an unhurried time to talk. “*Bring some of the fish you have now caught.*” (vs. 10) -- Jesus certainly could have supplied *all* of the fish for breakfast. Instead, He chose to “need” the fruit of their labors (which He Himself had given to them) to make them feel more comfortable, and to give them a sense of ownership and participation in the meal. “*Simon Peter went up and drew the net to land, full of large fish, one hundred and fifty-three...*” (vs. 11). Although Peter longed for Jesus, and was anxious to see Him, he did not feel comfortable, and evidently did not know what to say. At the first distraction, he was off serving and helping, ...but also *avoiding* talking with Jesus. He even took time to count the fish, which would take a few minutes, as you could imagine. “*...and although there were so many, the net was not torn.*” -- This fact is reported to reinforce the supernatural character of this event. “*Come and have breakfast.*” -- Jesus breaks the distraction, and calls them all back to attend to His purpose for their meeting.

The reinstatement of Peter (vss. 15-17). “*...when they had finished breakfast...*” -- Sharing a meal together is a good preparation for a serious discussion. Cf. Est. 5-7. “*Jesus said to Simon Peter...*” -- The purpose for this gathering is directed primarily toward dealing with Peter. “*Simon, son of John, do you love Me more than these?*” (vs. 15) -- Like a surgeon operating on an infected wound, this question was designed to directly bring up and expose Peter’s past statements of arrogance and self-inflation (Matt. 26:33-35; Mk. 14:29-31). **Peter had, in effect, claimed to love Jesus more than all the rest. He had said that even if all the others fell away, he would remain steadfast.** When Jesus had told him that he would deny Him, Peter exclaimed that he would willingly die rather than betray his Master. In reality, however, **when faced with the actual possibility of arrest and death, he had wimped out** and had done exactly as Jesus had said. **Fear had won out, and he denied that he even knew Jesus.** He felt this failure very deeply (Matt. 26:78; Lk. 22:60-62). **Not only did he see that he had failed, but he extrapolated from his disappointing performance that he himself was a failure,** unworthy of being an apostle. Thus, he was ready to go back to fishing. At least, he could do *that* respectably. The gifts and callings of God are irrevocable, however (Rom. 11:29), and Jesus had come to

call him once again to the role that was originally assigned him. **“Yes, Lord, You know that I love You.”** -- Notice, first, that Peter did *not* reassert his claim that his love was a greater love than possessed by the others. In fact, though it is not apparent in our English translations, **Peter even shrunk back from even using the terminology which Jesus used.** Indeed, he *did* have a love for Jesus, ...but not one of the quality which Jesus had asked. Jesus’ question was, “Simon, son of John, do you *agapas* Me more than these?” Peter’s response was, “Indeed, Lord, You know I *phileō* You.” **There is a significant difference in these two words. Jesus and Peter were not comparing apples to apples, here. *Agapaō* was a little used Greek word, one which Jesus had selected to describe the unusual love of God, the kind of love which was exemplified by Jesus’ willingness to lay down His life for us (Jn. 15:13), and the kind of love which the Master had said should be distinguishing mark of His disciples (Jn. 13:34,35). The peculiar nuance of this Greek word is that it flows out of the will, not the emotion. It is a benevolent choice to give of oneself for another.** It is not dependent upon the response of the other party, since it comes entirely from within *the giver*, ...his or her fullness, or willingness to give. Truthfully, Peter could not have claimed to have had this kind of love, based upon his woeful failure in the courtyard of the high priest. **Peter responded with the honesty of his heart, he loved Jesus as a friend; he enjoyed Him and His friendship. This word, *phileō*, spoke of a mutuality of enjoyment and compatibility.** It is most often used of a friendship kind of love. Peter gushed out, “Lord, You know that I delight in Your friendship!” **“He says to him, ‘Tend My lambs.’”** -- Surprisingly to Peter, **Jesus accepts his lesser form of love, and gives him the responsibility of tending and feeding His followers.**

Before that can sink in, however, Jesus asks another question. **“Simon, son of John, do you love Me?”** (vs. 16) In this second question, Jesus again uses *agapas*. Peter’s response is exactly as before, “Yes, Lord, you know that I delight in Your friendship!” **“Shepherd My sheep.”** -- Again, **Jesus seems to accept him where he is at, and gives him the responsibility of watching over and caring for His followers.**

“He says to him the third time, ‘Simon, son of John, do you love Me?’” (vs. 17) **This time, Jesus uses the same word that Peter had been using** in his responses to Jesus’ first two questions, a form of *phileō*. **“Peter was grieved...”** -- No wonder. **It would seem that Jesus was doubting even the affection that Peter had for Him! Was He calling Peter a liar?** Was He going to tell Peter that even his affection, his “friendship-love”, was defective? **“Lord, You know all things, You experientially-know that I love You.”** -- Peter’s desperate cry appealed to what he knew that Jesus had experienced. **Now they are comparing oranges to oranges. “Jesus says to him, ‘Tend my sheep.’”** --

This final acceptance, and assignment to duty, removes any question of Peter being on probation, ...or needing to try to be something he is not. *Jesus took him right where he was, and was willing to set him to work about His business. What about Peter's shame, his fear of failing again?* **“Truly, truly, I say to you...”** (vs. 18) -- Once again, Jesus employs this formula to indicate that a very significant statement was to follow. This was addressed to Peter alone, as the singular form of “you” indicates. The remainder of verse 18 is a comparison of how Peter used to live, versus what will happen in the future. Vs. 19 interprets the saying as referring to what kind of death Peter would die, glorifying God. **“In the end,” Jesus told Peter, “you will succeed where you failed before. You will lay down your life for Me.” “Follow Me!”** -- Jesus again renews the call of discipleship! This is the *fourth time* Jesus had specifically called Peter to follow Him (cf. Matt. 4:19; Lk. 5:1-11; 6:12-14).

“Lord, what about him?” (vs. 21) -- Peter, seeing John walking behind them, did what is characteristic of so many of us. **Instead of responding directly to God’s call on our own life, we often tend to see who else is following.** We want to be part of a larger group. We don’t want to be the “odd ball”. We quickly look around to see the response of others. **It is a subtle way of diverting our attention away from the intensity and directness of God’s call on our lives.** God’s call is a very personal and individual offer. Furthermore, our personal journey is unique to us. We can’t really compare it to others. **I must be faithful to God’s will for my life. I am answerable to Him,** and He will not measure me by the performance of others. I will stand before God *alone*. **“...what is that to you? You follow Me!”** (vs. 22) -- Jesus would not be diverted from His purpose, nor would He let Peter off the hook. He came to reinstate Peter, and set him to work for the Kingdom. **“This saying went out among the brethren that that disciple would not die...”** (vs. 23) -- Jesus never intended to really imply that John would not die until He returned. That, however, became a rumor which the aged apostle felt was important to clarify. **“This is the disciple who is testifying to these things and wrote these things, and we know that his testimony is true.”** (vs. 24) -- All of the other apostles had long been dead. To all his contemporaries, there could be no question regarding who this disciple was. It could only be John the son of Zebedee. His testimony was reliable because he had been an eyewitness to the events recorded, as well as a confidant of the Lord Jesus while He was here. **“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.”** (vs. 25) -- John would know. He was there for those very intense three and a half years. **What John wrote is only a very brief sketch, ... meant to complement the other gospel writings, and meant to draw us toward his Master.**