



**Title:** Loving and Following Christ

**Text:** John 21:15-25

**Date:** May 1, 2022

**Main Idea:** Jesus forgives and uses his servants to feed his sheep.

## Personal Study Guide

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READ ENTIRE TEXT: JOHN 21:15-25

## Highlight – What stands out?

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1. What terms or ideas do you see here that you've heard before in John?
2. Who are the characters in this passage? What did they say and what did they do?
3. What is happening with Peter in verses 15-19? What stands out to you about this interaction?
4. Look at John 21:20-23. Compare these two predicted deaths for John and Peter. What's the difference?
5. How does Peter respond to this prediction? How does Jesus respond?

## Explain – What does this mean?

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Here we get his personal interaction with Peter and Peter's reinstatement. There are two ways we can break this section down—how Jesus forgives and how Jesus uses his servants. This helps explain the sign that previously happened with the fish.

1. In his interaction with Peter in verses 15, 16, and 17b, what does Jesus say to Peter? How many times does he say it? Does this sound familiar to another interaction Peter has in John 13:31-38 and 18:15-27?
2. Look back at verses 15-19. What details stand out to you about how Jesus forgives?
3. Read Hebrews 11:32-12:2. How does this inform what Jesus is telling Peter about the life he is called to?

### Wrap Up:

1. The purpose of John is found in John 20:31 – what is it? How does this final scene fulfill this verse?

2. Think back to the entire book. What characters, events, signs, themes, or verses come to mind? (**Tip: This might be a good question to ask your Group earlier in the week so they can come prepared.**)

## **Apply – How does this change me?**

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1. How has Jesus restored you to right relationship with him? How has he fed you with his words and given you a mission for his glory?
2. Peter is basically tempted to compare his commission from Jesus with the commission of another. How does this convict you? How do you struggle with these very things?
3. Think ahead to how Peter is used in the book of Acts. What do you think this means for how you as a Christian are restored by Christ, fed by Christ, and now commissioned by Christ?

4. How has your understanding of Jesus grown throughout the John study? How has your love for Jesus grown throughout the John study?

## **Respond – What’s my next step?**

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1. As we are fed by the words of the Apostles, through the word, we also are to feed others. We are to serve and use our gifts, and run the race set before us. How will this affect the way you use your gifts and the time that God has given you? Is there a “lamb” you’re called to serve this week?
  
2. The implication for Peter’s life is that he would go and be a “fisher of men.” Think about the circle of influence you have (your neighborhood, school, workplace, family). Can you identify people you can commit to praying for and also inviting into this restored relationship with the Savior? What is your next step with them?

## **Commentary**

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### **B. JESUS AND PETER AND JOHN (21:15–24)**

**21:15–17.** Many contemporary commentators think of vv. 15–23 as a fundamentally different unit from what precedes. To use the language of Schnackenburg (3. 361), vv. 1–14 constitute ‘a disciple pericope’, and vv. 15–19 ‘a Peter fragment’. In the latter, the breakfast and the other disciples disappear from view, leaving only Peter, the beloved disciple, and Jesus. This is unwarranted. The opening words, *When they had finished eating*, establish the connection; there is no compelling reason for dismissing them as ‘editorial’ (as many do). The link is important: as Peter had boasted of his reliability in the presence of his fellow disciples (13:8, 37–38; cf. 18:10–11), so this restoration to public ministry is effected in a similarly public environment—regardless of whatever private forgiveness and reconciliation there may have been between Jesus and Peter when Jesus revealed himself after his resurrection to this one apostle, alone (1 Cor. 15:5; Lk. 24:34). Later in the pericope we are probably to think of Peter walking down the beach with Jesus, the beloved disciple not far behind, certainly within earshot (vv. 20–21).

The public nature of Peter’s reinstatement is suggested by Jesus’ initial question, *Simon son of John, do you truly love me more than these?* By itself, *more than these* (*toutōn*, genitive of comparison) could be interpreted in three ways: (1) ‘Do you love me more than you love these disciples?’ But this question does not cohere with any theme in the book. (2) ‘Do you love me more than you love this fishing gear?’ That is possible; the boat and the nets have been mentioned, and doubtless other gear was lying around. But in John 1 Peter is not called *from* his fishing, and the fishing of 21:3 has fewer negative overtones than some suppose. In any case all seven disciples went fishing: why then focus on Peter? (3) ‘Do you love me more than these other disciples do?’ (which of course assumes they are still present). This makes sense. Peter has always been able to advance the strongest personal boast. On the night Jesus was betrayed, while others were growing quiet, Peter could insist, ‘I will lay down my life for you [not “We” and “our”!]’ (13:37). It was Peter who slashed at Malchus (18:10). Cf. Matthew 26:33. But physical courage was not enough that night, and it was Peter also, spirit willing but flesh weak, who publicly disowned the Lord. Whatever potential for future service he had therefore depended not only on forgiveness from Jesus, but also on reinstatement amongst the disciples.

Some expositions of these verses turn on the distribution of the two different verbs for ‘love’ that appear. When Jesus asks the question the first two times, ‘Do you love me?’, the verb is *agapaō*; Peter responds with ‘I love you’ (*phileō*). The third time, however, Jesus himself uses *phileō*; and still Peter cannot bring himself to use more than the same. Commonly it is argued that *agapaō* is the stronger form of ‘to love’, but so powerfully has Peter had his old self-confidence expunged from him that the most he will claim is the weaker form—even when Jesus draws attention to the point, using the weaker form himself when he asks the question for the third time. This accounts for the distinction the NIV maintains between ‘truly love’ and ‘love’.<sup>18</sup>

This will not do, for at least the following reasons:

(1) We have already seen that the two verbs are used interchangeably in this Gospel. The expression 'beloved disciple', more literally 'disciple whom Jesus loved', can be based on either verb (*cf.* notes on 20:2). The Father loves the Son—and both verbs serve (3:35; 5:20). Jesus loved Lazarus—and again both verbs serve (11:5, 36).

(2) No reliable distinction can be based on the LXX. For instance, Jacob's preferential love for Joseph is expressed with both verbs (Gn. 37:3, 4). When Amnon incestuously rapes his sister Tamar, both verbs can be used to refer to his 'love' (2 Sam. 13). Despite one verb for 'love' in the Hebrew text of Proverbs 8:17, the LXX uses both *agapaō* and *phileō*.

(3) Convincing evidence has been advanced that the verb *agapaō* was coming into prominence throughout Greek literature from about the fourth century BC onward, as one of the standard verbs for 'to love'. One of the reasons for this change is that *phileō* has taken on the additional meaning 'to kiss', in some contexts. In other words, *agapaō* does not come into play because it is a peculiarly sacred word.

(4) Even in the New Testament, *agapaō* is not always distinguished by a good object: Demas regrettably 'loved' the present age (2 Tim. 4:10).

(5) Nor does it help to argue, with Hendriksen (2. 494–500), that because the *total* range of meaning of each verb is not the same as that of the other (e.g. *agapaō* never means 'to kiss'), therefore there is necessarily some distinction to be made here. But this conclusion is invalid. All agree that synonyms enjoy differences of association, nuance and emotional colouring within their total semantic range. 'But within any one individual passage these differences do not amount to a distinction of real theological reference: they do not specify a difference in the kind of love referred to.'

(6) Amongst those who insist a distinction between the two verbs is to be maintained in each verse, there is no agreement. Thus, Trench insists *agapaō* is philanthropic and altruistic, but without emotional attachment, and therefore much too cold for Peter's affection. That is why the apostle prefers *phileō*. By contrast, for Westcott (2. 367) *agapaō* denotes the higher love that will in time come to be known as the distinctively Christian love, while Peter cannot bring himself to profess more than 'the feeling of natural love', *phileō*. Bruce (p. 405) wisely comments: 'When two such distinguished Greek scholars (both, moreover, tending to argue from the standards of classical Greek) see the significance of the synonyms so differently, we may wonder if indeed we are intended to see such distinct significance.'

(7) By now it has become clear that the Evangelist constantly uses minor variations for stylistic reasons of his own (*cf.* Morris, *SFG*, pp. 293–319). This is confirmed by the present passage. In addition to the two words for 'love', John resorts to three other pairs: *boskō* and *poimainō* ('feed' and 'take care of the sheep'), *arnia* and *probata* ('lambs' and 'sheep'), and *oida* and *ginōskō* (both rendered 'you know' in v. 17). These have not stirred homiletical imaginations; it is difficult to see why the first pair should.

Jesus' initial question probes Peter to the depth of his being. He does not try to answer in terms of the relative strength of his love as compared with that of other disciples. He appeals rather to the Lord's knowledge. Despite my bitter failure, he says in effect, I love you—you know that I love you. Jesus accepts his declaration, doubtless to Peter's relief, and commissions him: *Feed my lambs*. The emphasis is now on the pastoral rather than the evangelistic (cf. v. 11). Peter's love for his Lord, and the evidence of his reinstatement, are both to be displayed in Peter's pastoral care for the Lord's flock (cf. Jn. 10).

But that is not the end of the matter. Three times Jesus asks the same question. When Peter is particularly grieved (v. 17), it is not because Jesus has changed verbs, but because the same question is being asked for the third time. As he had disowned Jesus three times, so Jesus requires this elementary yet profound confession three times. There is no trace of self-righteousness in Peter's response. He can only appeal to the fact that the Lord knows everything, and therefore knows Peter's heart: *Lord, you know all things; you know that I love you*. And that is enough. Lest there be any doubt that Peter is fully restored to future service, Jesus again commands, *Feed my lambs*. This ministry 'is described in verbs, not nouns: Tend, feed, not Be a pastor, hold the office of pastor. And the sheep are Christ's sheep, not Peter's. Not, Tend your flock, but Tend my sheep' (Barrett, *Essays*, pp. 165–166). That Peter fulfilled the terms of the service required of him receives its best attestation in 1 Peter (esp. 5:1–4).

Strangely, some Roman Catholic scholars have used this passage to establish the primacy of Peter as the first pontiff, with rights of governance and authority. It is usually argued that in the Old Testament the figure of the shepherd was often tied to kingly rule: cf. 2 Samuel 5:2, where David declares, 'And the LORD said to you, "You will shepherd my people Israel, and you will become their ruler".' When John 21:15–17 is tied to the common Roman Catholic exegesis of Matthew 16:16–19, the argument gains a certain plausibility.

But quite apart from questions of succession, which are certainly not in view in either Matthew 16:13–20 or John 21:15–17, neither the ostensible link between the two passages, nor the most common Catholic exegesis of either passage, is very secure. Matthew 16:13–20 certainly establishes a unique role for Peter in the *founding* of the church—i.e. it establishes what has been called 'his salvation-historical primacy'. It does not establish him in a position of ruling authority over other apostles. As for John 21:15–17, neither founding pre-eminence nor comparative authority is in view. It is true that the figure of the shepherd can be used to picture authority. But this passage does not establish that Peter has relatively more authority than other 'shepherds' of the flock of God. When close comparisons are made with Acts 20:28 and 1 Peter 4:1–4, it becomes clear that *each* shepherd of the flock of God, of Jesus' sheep, of the church of God, is to mirror *both* authority *and* a certain brokenness that is utterly exemplary. The Ephesian elders are to guard and shepherd the flock over which the Holy Spirit has made them overseers ('bishops'—but without

any evidence to support a notion, this early, of *monarchical* bishops with authority over several parishes), while Peter pictures himself as a ‘fellow elder’ who can encourage other elders to be ‘shepherds’ and ‘overseers’ (‘bishops’), ‘being examples to the flock’. And all must give an account to the Chief Shepherd when he appears, the Lord Jesus himself. Thus there is nothing intrinsic to the language of John 21:15–17 that suggests a *distinctive* authority for Peter. All Christian leadership entails a certain tension between authority and meek, exemplary service, patterned finally on Jesus himself. In the context of the Fourth Gospel, these verses deal with Peter’s reinstatement to service, not with his elevation to primacy.

**21:18–19.** For *I tell you the truth*, cf. notes on 1:51. Jesus’ prophecy in v. 18 is often taken as an ambiguous adaptation of a proverb that originally contrasted the vigour of youth with the frailty of old age. Bultmann (p. 713) reconstructs the proverb this way: ‘In youth a man is free to go where he will; in old age a man must let himself be taken where he does not will.’ On this reading, the Evangelist, after the fact, applies it to Peter’s death by crucifixion. Elliott goes farther, and understands *neōteros* (‘younger’) to refer to a new convert, and contrasts his tempestuous youth with the mature serenity of age.

As popular as this view may be, Bultmann’s suggestion is an hypothesis not only without evidence, but against the evidence. In this context, the *younger* Peter carries the positive connotations of freedom, while *old* here signals not serenity but restriction and martyrdom. More important is the way *stretch out your hands* was understood in the ancient world: it widely referred to crucifixion (Haenchen, 2. 226–227). Some think that improbable in this context because of the sequence: Peter is told that, when he is old, he will stretch out his hands, someone else will dress him and lead him where he does not want to go. If this ‘stretching of the hands’ refers to crucifixion, should it not *follow* the other items? Bauer (p. 232) proposed long ago that this ‘stretching’ took place when a condemned prisoner was tied to his cross-member (the *patibulum*: cf. notes on 19:17) and forced to carry his ‘cross’ to the place of execution. The cross-member would be placed on the prisoner’s neck and shoulders, his arms tied to it, and *then* he would be led away to death. Despite the fact that many reject this explanation (even Schnackenburg [3. 482 n. 75] joins with those who write this off as ‘antiquarian sophistry!’), the most detailed study of crucifixion in the ancient world describes just such horrible variations on this grisly form of execution.<sup>25</sup>

The Evangelist’s explanation (v. 19) of Jesus’ prediction (v. 18), therefore, aligns with the prediction itself: *Jesus said this to indicate the kind of death by which Peter would glorify God*. And thus he imitates Christ, not only in the kind of death he suffers (cf. 12:33; 18:32), but also, though to a lesser extent, in bringing glory to God by his death (cf. 12:27–28; 13:31–32; 17:1). Peter himself came to recognize the principle: whenever any Christian follows Christ to suffering and death, it is a means of bringing praise to God (1 Pet. 4:14–16). What

is remarkable is that Peter lived and served three decades with this prediction hanging over him.

By the time the Fourth Gospel was written, the prediction had been fulfilled, and Peter had glorified God by his martyrdom, probably in Rome, under the emperor Nero. Extra-biblical sources for the event are not strong. Clement of Rome (c. AD 96) mentions Peter's martyrdom but does not reveal what form it took (*1 Clement* 5:4). Writing about AD 212, Tertullian affirms that it was when Peter was bound to the cross that he was girded by someone else (*Scorpiace* ['Antidote for the Scorpion's Sting'] 15), but it is unclear whether Tertullian has access to independent information, or is simply referring to this text. Later accounts of Peter asking to be crucified upside down, because he felt unworthy to be crucified as his Lord was, are too remote and too infected with legendary accretions to be reliable. What is undisputed is that the indelible shame Peter bore for his public disowning of the Lord Jesus Christ on the night he was sentenced to death was forgiven by the Lord himself, and subsequently overwhelmed by the apostle's fruitful ministry and martyrdom.

Jesus' concluding words to Peter, *Follow me*, may invite Peter for a private walk along the beach (*cf.* v. 20). But in the context of this book, they do more: they tie this step of discipleship to Jesus' initial call (1:43), challenge Peter to consistent discipleship until the martyrdom he now faces comes due, and implicitly invite every waverer, every reader, to the same steadfast pursuit of the risen Lord. They also anticipate v. 21.

**21:20–21.** Whether Jesus and Peter begin their walk now, or have been doing so for some time, is not clear. Either way, the beloved disciple (*cf.* notes on 13:23) has left the group and is *following* them. Many think this is a subtle way of advancing the beloved disciple's interests: Peter is told to *follow* (v. 19) Jesus, but the beloved disciple is already *following* him. This rather subtle interpretation is possible only if we think that Jesus and Peter were conversing privately *before* Jesus said, 'Follow me!' Only in that case could it be thought that the beloved disciple was *already* following. If instead it is only at this point that Jesus and Peter stroll down the beach, then Peter begins to 'follow' from the moment Jesus speaks. If the beloved disciple also does, he is farther behind! Probably the entire approach is too subtle: if the beloved disciple's following is to be interpreted symbolically, then why not Peter's turning around?

That the Evangelist specifically identifies the beloved disciple by referring back to 13:24–25 is not because this is the first time he appears in the epilogue (*cf.* v. 7, where he is not so identified) but for two other reasons. First, the reminder that this disciple leaned his head on Jesus' breast at the last supper establishes his credentials as an intimate of the Lord Jesus—an especially significant intimacy in light of the beloved disciple's distinctive role (vv. 22, 24). The point is important, for this intimacy simultaneously establishes the credentials of the Fourth Gospel. It may not be too far-fetched to think of John leaning on Jesus' breast as a kind of lesser intimacy to that of the Son with the

Father, in the bosom of the Father (1:18; *cf.* also notes on 15:9–11). Second, the episode at the last supper calls to mind that Peter signalled to John to get him to ask Jesus a question: *i.e.* it assumes a certain intimacy between the beloved disciple and Peter. That intimacy makes Peter's question more comprehensible, if not more justifiable. His own prognosis is not very good: for Peter the cost of discipleship will be high. What about *him*?

**21:22.** The burden of Jesus' reply is tart: in brief, Peter is told it is none of his business. Peter has been informed what will befall him: let him therefore obey, regardless of the specific forms of obedience others must pursue (*cf.* 1 Cor. 4:2–7). *You must follow me* (the pronoun *You* [sing.] is emphatic). John may be asked to *remain* until Jesus returns: *what is that to you?* Clearly in this context the verb *remain* (*menō*) means 'remain alive on earth', without any overtone of its use in John 15. The transparently futurist eschatology should not be explained away. It is in line with 5:24–25, 28–29; 6:39–40; 14:3.

There is no belittling of either disciple. One of them may be called to strategic pastoral ministry (vv. 15–17) and a martyr's crown (vv. 18–19), and the other to a long life (v. 22) and to strategic historical-theological witness, in written form (v. 24). It is this that ties v. 24 so closely to the preceding verses. And if the beloved disciple's commission is not cast in terms as explicit as those of Peter, it is the historical record that constrains the Evangelist: at this point Peter needed a fresh commission, since that was part of his restoration, while the beloved disciple did not.

**21:23.** Whatever else may be disputed in this verse, it is clear that here the beloved disciple is a real individual, not an idealization of the ideal follower or of some part of the church. It is also clear that the saying of v. 22 circulated widely in at least some parts of the church before this chapter was written. The saying became an ill-advised but influential support for those whose eagerness for the parousia was not bounded by the careful restrictions imposed by, say, 1 Thessalonians 4:13–18 and 2 Thessalonians 2. As long as the beloved disciple was alive, their understanding of the imminence of the parousia could rise with the disciple's increasing age, until it reached fever pitch. Once he died (whether or not that death had taken place by the time of writing), their faith would suffer a rude shock, and the enemies of the Gospel could smirk on the sidelines. And so the Evangelist carefully points out what Jesus did and did not say.

But had the beloved disciple died by this point? Strong voices can be found on both sides of the question. Those who think the beloved disciple was dead at the time of writing suggest that it was his death, the death of the last eyewitness, that precipitated the need to include ch. 21 (e.g. Brown, 2. 1117–1119, 1142; *cf.* Smalley, p. 81). In that case, it is a trifle surprising to find v. 23 cast as it is. Under their assumptions, once the crisis of the beloved disciple's death had occurred the problem would involve the very structure of Christian eschatology. The rumour about the beloved disciple would have to be addressed, much as here, but all kinds of other evidence (like that of 2 Thes. 2)

could be adduced to justify the view that Jesus' return might well be delayed. As it is, it seems simpler to think that the circulating rumour is making the rounds while the beloved disciple is still alive, but advancing in years, and he is determined to stifle it as well as he can for fear of the damage that would be done if he died before the Lord's return. If the rumour is based on a false interpretation of Jesus that is circulating round the churches, it seems reasonable to suppose that, if the beloved disciple were already dead, the falsity of that interpretation could instantly be established by pointing out the disciple's grave. The silence on this point supports the view that the beloved disciple was still alive at the time of writing. The point is strengthened if John's intended readers are Jews, proselytes and God-fearers who know something of the truth but are holding back from conversion to the risen Christ. They, too, have heard something of these rumours, and the Evangelist does not want the credibility of his witness to them, the witness that we call the Fourth Gospel (v. 24), seriously impaired by his own death.

It is possible, but not quite certain, that the Evangelist, whom the next verse identifies as the beloved disciple, is confronting the same sort of divisiveness with which Paul deals in 1 Cor. 1–4 (*cf.* esp. 1:10–11). Some are saying, 'I am of Peter', and others 'I am of John' (assuming John is the beloved disciple). The Evangelist is not interested in playing such games, even to his own advantage. He is perfectly aware that the form of service may differ from believer to believer. What he wants is that his readers will so follow Jesus that they will be true disciples themselves (*cf.* Lindars, p. 640). Although this could be strongly applied to a divided church, it has its own dramatic appeal to outsiders. The relationships amongst the apostles need to be understood, so that even if the church does not always live up to the teachings of its Master, potential converts may take comfort from the fact that obedience to Christ does not have to descend into party politics. The Jesus whom both Peter and the beloved disciple served in quite different ways, in ways as different as the service that will be rendered by all the converts that follow, is the Jesus passionately concerned about the unity of his people (Jn. 17), the oneness of his flock (Jn. 10).

**21:24.** Many scholars treat vv. 24 and 25 as coming from a different source or sources than the rest of ch. 21. At very least, they are read as a separate conclusion or conclusions, with little direct connection with the preceding. But v. 24 is better seen as part of the answer to Peter's question in v. 21: 'Lord, what about him?' (*cf.* Barrett, pp. 587–588, and notes also on vv. 22–23). All disciples live under the commission of 20:21. After that, there are distinctions: Peter serves by tending the flock of God and by glorifying God in his death; the beloved disciple serves by following Jesus throughout a long life, and as the trustworthy *disciple who testifies to these things and who wrote them down*. That means v. 24 has to be read as part of vv. 20–23, and v. 20 establishes that the beloved disciple is none other than the beloved disciple who appears throughout the Fourth Gospel. By the same token, *these things* to which this

disciple testifies must not be the contents of ch. 21 alone, but the entire Fourth Gospel.

It is more difficult to decide to what person or persons the 'we' refers in this clause, *We know that his testimony is true*. The principal options are these:

(1) The *We* refers to the elders in the church at Ephesus (Westcott, 2. 374), or to others who are closely linked with the beloved disciple (Schlatter, p. 376), or perhaps to the church to which he belonged, without specifying Ephesus (Bultmann, pp. 717–718). The advantage of this view is that it allows full force to the plural *We*. The Muratorian Canon (ll. 10–15) reports that John wrote his Gospel only after some of his disciples and fellow bishops had entreated him to do so (similarly Clement of Alexandria, as quoted by Eusebius, *H.E.* VI. xiv. 7). Again, however, we do not know if this is independent information, or informed guessing based on the exegesis of this verse. One form or another of this theory makes sense not only of the *We* but also of the fact that others than apostles should get involved with the attestation of an apostolic work. 'The "we" is to be taken with full seriousness; there exists an apostolic church whose very existence is a confirmation and affirmation of the apostolic witness' (Barrett, p. 588). What must be added is that no form of this theory *in itself* justifies the view that the Fourth Gospel was therefore a joint product, with the beloved disciple providing some memories and perspectives while others (later?) wrote them up.

Yet the view is not without difficulty. It is hard to imagine in what context other church leaders would be providing a character reference for an apostle. The problem is perhaps avoided if we take *We know that his testimony is true* either as a form of identification (it is none other than the truthful beloved disciple who wrote this, and we testify to the fact) or as a form the Christian leaders adopt for identifying themselves with John's readers (*all of us know that what the beloved disciple attests is true*). But neither is a natural interpretation of the text.

(2) It has been argued that *We know* is an indefinite expression more or less the equivalent of the modern 'as is well known' or the like. Doubtless that is possible, but it is an extremely odd expression for an author to use in justification of his *own* truthfulness.

(3) John uses the *We* to refer to himself—*i.e.* it is an editorial 'we'. Certainly John sometimes uses this *plural* form on the lips of the *individual* characters he describes within the Fourth Gospel (*e.g.* 3:2, 11; 20:2), though it must be admitted that in each case crucial interpretative questions arise. Assuming the author is also the writer of the Johannine epistles, the expression becomes fairly frequent (*e.g.* 1 Jn. 1:2, 4, 5, 6, 7; 3 Jn. 12). Not all of these occurrences function the same way. Some seem to be tying the author to apostolic authority (*e.g.* 1 Jn. 1:3), others connect the author with his readers (*e.g.* 1 Jn. 1:7), others identify his opponents (*e.g.* 1 Jn. 1:6), and still others serve as a self-reference (*e.g.* 1 Jn. 1:4).

Despite these parallels, the use of ‘we’ in John 21:24, if taken as a self-reference by the Evangelist, remains a somewhat awkward form when the writer is understood to be attesting the truthfulness of his own witness. However, even this is not entirely without parallel in the New Testament. For instance, because Paul loathes every form of boastful self-promotion, yet finds himself in the awkward position of having to defend his spiritual credentials in the face of the attacks of the false ‘super-apostles’, he describes his own spectacular visions and revelations by referring to ‘a man in Christ’—in the third person (2 Cor. 12:2–4). But perhaps the strongest evidence in support of this view comes from the Fourth Gospel’s Prologue: ‘We have seen his glory’ (1:14).

Either the first or third option is possible, the third slightly preferable. For some (e.g. Morris, pp. 880–881), the former option is sufficient to support apostolic authorship. For others (e.g. Thyen, cited at the beginning of this chapter), not even the latter will do: he thinks the unknown Evangelist created the figure of the beloved disciple and inserted him at appropriate junctures into his Gospel to give his work more credibility. Of course, this is a more damaging admission than Thyen realizes. To gain such credibility the Evangelist had to create a figure that his readers *think* is someone important, none other than the apostle John. Thus Thyen implicitly admits that the Gospel as most naturally read ascribes authorship to the apostle, but posits pseudonymity against the more natural reading of the text.

Culpepper (pp. 45–49) does something similar. Using literary categories developed in connection with the study of the nineteenth-century European novel, he lucidly demonstrates that the ‘narrator’ finally identifies the ‘implied author’ with the beloved disciple. That is exactly correct. But Culpepper then distances the ‘implied author’ from the real author in a way that could not be sanctioned if the literary work in question were not viewed as a piece of fiction but as a work of (theologically structured) history, where the author goes to great pains to emphasize the theme of witness and testimony (*cf.* notes on 1:7, 15; *cf.* Introduction, §§ III, IV).

Even if the beloved disciple is the one *who testifies to these things*, what is meant by the claim that *he wrote them down*? Since Bernard (2. 713), it has become popular to compare 19:19: presumably Pilate did not do the actual writing. So here: perhaps the beloved disciple caused the book to be written, but had little hand in the actual writing.

But this will not do. The context of 19:19 demonstrates that, assuming Pilate did not do the actual writing, the wording on the *titulus* accurately expressed what he wanted to say, so accurately that the addition of the one word proposed by the Jewish authorities would have changed his intent. Pilate rejected the proposal. It may be that amanuenses had some freedom of composition (Rom. 16:22 is frequently cited): the evidence is not very clear, but it is reasonable to suppose that gifted amanuenses sometimes did more than take dictation. No matter: once the author (as opposed to the amanuensis) read the final product, and signed it with his own name (as Paul did with his

epistles), it was his product. In any case, even if *wrote ... down* here really means 'caused to be written down', there is no evidence whatsoever that this was used for a *later* writing of *earlier* testimony, after the witness had died; nor is there any evidence that the term 'amanuensis' is appropriate where someone ostensibly reports the thoughts and witness of an employer or teacher now deceased. Further, even if one were to insist that the verb 'to write' *can* mean 'to cause to write', and therefore allows some distance between the beloved disciple and the text, the previous clause, *who testifies to these things*, 'implies firsthand testimony' (Bruce, p. 3). 'The most natural meaning of these words, and therefore the meaning to be adopted unless very strong reasons are brought against it, is that the disciple himself not only bore witness to but also wrote down *tauta* ("these things")' (Barrett, p. 587).

In short, there are two identifications to be made: (1) the beloved disciple is the apostle John; (2) the evangelist is the beloved disciple. If both of these are true, then the evangelist is John. We have already outlined the evidence in favour of (1) (*cf.* Introduction, § IV, and notes on 13:23). Ironically, some of those most strongly supportive of (1) are those who deny (2). This verse establishes, not with absolute certainty but with reasonable clarity, the truthfulness of (2).

### C. THE GREATNESS OF JESUS (21:25)

**21:25.** It is impossible to be certain, but the most natural way of reading this verse is to assume that the Evangelist, now that he has identified himself as the beloved disciple (= the apostle John), feels free to make an overt self-reference (*I suppose*). This view is enhanced if the 'we' in v. 24 is also a self-reference: certainly 1 John delights in going back and forth between 'we' and 'I'. On this reading, John is overtly alluding to 20:30–31: several of the clauses in v. 25 have close parallels in the earlier passage. But now the horizons are expanded. Not only are there many other 'signs' not recorded in the Fourth Gospel (20:30), there are many other things (*alla polla*) Jesus did—so many that if they were all recorded *the whole world* (one of the few 'neutral' instances of *kosmos*: *cf.* notes on 1:9) *would not have room for the books that would be written*.

Doubtless this may be taken as a pardonable exaggeration, but the stylistic and theological care of the Evangelist throughout the work argue decisively against the suggestion. If in v. 24 the Evangelist has already alluded to the Prologue (*cf.* notes above), it is best to think he is doing so again. The Jesus to whom he bears witness is not only the obedient Son and the risen Lord, he is the incarnate Word, the one through whom the universe was created. If all his deeds were described, the world would be a very small and inadequate library indeed.

It is as if John has identified himself (v. 24), but is not content to focus on himself, not even on his veracity. He must close by saying his own work is only a minute part of all the honours due the Son.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> D. A. Carson, *[The Gospel according to John](#)*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Leicester, England; Grand Rapids, MI: Inter-Varsity Press; W.B. Eerdmans, 1991), 675–686.



## Group Study Guide

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\*This lesson is for the Group Leader to use to teach the lesson and facilitate the discussion. It is not intended that you will use every question in this guide during your group time. You will likely only be able to cover 4-5 questions, depending on how discussion goes. This guide is longer than what you will need but provides the freedom and flexibility to pull questions out for discussion that will best serve your group time.

**Tip:** You may want to pull one question from each section for discussion or spend more time on a particular section than another on. It's totally up to your discretion.

## Introduction

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**Icebreaker Question:** Can you think of a time in your life when someone else's life seemed more appealing to you?

## Highlight – What stands out?

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1. What is happening with Peter in verses 15-19? What is present and what is absent?
2. Look at John 21:20-23. Compare these two predicted deaths for John and Peter. What's the difference?
3. How does Peter respond to this prediction? How does Jesus respond?
4. What terms or ideas do you see here that you've heard before in John?

## Explain – What does this mean?

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1. This section follows a miracle of feeding the disciples (John 21:1-14). Continuing with John's themes of signs and explanations, how does Jesus' restoration of Peter explain the sign in the previous verses? (Hint: What did Jesus do for Peter? What does he call Peter to now do?)
2. Look at the John 21:18-23. Now read 1 Peter 4:12-19. How has Peter's response changed?

**Below is a quote from the commentary that is an encouraging summary of Peter's restoration and end of life:**

*"The Evangelist's explanation (v. 19) of Jesus' prediction (v. 18), therefore, aligns with the prediction itself: Jesus said this to indicate the kind of death by which Peter would glorify God. And thus he imitates Christ, not only in the kind of*

death he suffers (cf. 12:33; 18:32), but also, though to a lesser extent, in bringing glory to God by his death (cf. 12:27–28; 13:31–32; 17:1). Peter himself came to recognize the principle: whenever any Christian follows Christ to suffering and death, it is a means of bringing praise to God (1 Pet. 4:14–16). What is remarkable is that Peter lived and served three decades with this prediction hanging over him.

By the time the Fourth Gospel was written, the prediction had been fulfilled, and Peter had glorified God by his martyrdom, probably in Rome, under the emperor Nero.”

### **Wrap Up:**

1. The purpose of John is found in John 20:31 – what is it? How does this final scene fulfill this verse?
2. Think back to the entire book as a Group. What characters, events, signs, themes, or verses come to mind?

## **Apply – How do I live this out?**

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1. How has Jesus restored you to right relationship with him? How has he fed you with his words and given you a mission for his glory?
2. Peter is basically tempted to compare his commission from Jesus with the commission of another. How does this convict you? How do you struggle with these very things?
3. How has your understanding of Jesus grown throughout the John study? How has your love for Jesus grown throughout the John study?

**THIS IS A GOOD PLACE TO STOP AND SHARE A PERSONAL STORY OR ILLUSTRATION OF SOMEONE WHO GOD HAS RESTORED AND USED, OR AN EXAMPLE OF HOW GOD USES PEOPLE IN A VARIETY OF DIFFERENT WAYS (LIKE PETER AND JOHN) TO ACCOMPLISH HIS PURPOSES TO MAKE MORE DISCIPLES.**

## Respond – What’s my next step?

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1. As we are fed by the words of the Apostles, through the word, we also are to feed others. We are to serve and use our gifts, and run the race set before us. How will this affect the way you use your gifts and the time that God has given you? Is there a “lamb” you’re called to serve this week?
2. The implication for Peter’s life is that he would go and be a “fisher of men.” Think about the circle of influence you have (your neighborhood, school, workplace, family). Can you identify people you can commit to praying for and also inviting into this restored relationship with the Savior? What is your next step with them?

**This quote from the commentary is a fitting way to end the entire series. If there is time, it could be helpful to read in your Group:**

*“The Jesus to whom he bears witness is not only the obedient Son and the risen Lord, he is the incarnate Word, the one through whom the universe was created. If all his deeds were described, the world would be a very small and inadequate library indeed.*

*It is as if John has identified himself (v. 24), but is not content to focus on himself, not even on his veracity. He must close by saying his own work is only a minute part of all the honours due the Son.<sup>2</sup>”*

## Additional Resource:

**Article:** [What is That To You? You Follow Me](#) by John Piper

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<sup>2</sup> D. A. Carson, [The Gospel according to John](#), The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Leicester, England; Grand Rapids, MI: Inter-Varsity Press; W.B. Eerdmans, 1991), 675–686.

**Sermon:** [Loving and Serving Christ](#) by Kent Hughes