

John 21:1-19 – “What Jesus Asks”¹

Fellowship question: (Use *one* of these to break the ice, to begin some discussion, and lead into the study):

What is one thing you’ve wanted to accomplish but have been frustrated in your attempt to accomplish?

When you want to “get away from it all,” where do you go, or what do you do, to escape?

Information

We have more pre-resurrection than post-resurrection stories of Jesus. John’s Gospel, which has already told us that there were more stories about Jesus than there were books that could hold them, gives us half a dozen stories. One was the story we covered last week, the story of “doubting Thomas.” Today’s two stories focus on the disciple Simon Peter.

- Have a class member read John 21:1-3.

We know that when Jesus originally called Simon to be his disciple, Simon was in the business of catching fish to sell at the market.

- Have a class member read Mark 1:16-18.

To put this story in context, by this time (in John’s gospel), Jesus has risen from the dead, he has appeared to Mary Magdalene, he has appeared to the disciples without Thomas, and then with him. What do the disciples know about the post-resurrected Jesus by this time? (Jesus has conquered death; Jesus body is different – he can appear in a room in spite of locked doors; Mary does not recognize Jesus until he calls her name; Jesus body is recognizable – he has scars from the nails and spear; Jesus comes and goes, so the disciples are not “following him” around the countryside as they had been pre-crucifixion; etc.)

We are not told why Peter decides to go fishing or why the others decide to join him. What do you imagine was motivating them? (wanting the comfort of doing something familiar; the need for money/food; wanting to stick together; an escape, etc.)

We can only imagine the conversation on the boat. What are some of the questions you might imagine the disciples were discussing among themselves? (What is our future? What is the future of our movement/sect? Do you think we’ll see Jesus again? Etc.)

- Have a class member read John 21:4-8.

One of the disciples recognizes that the man on the shore is Jesus. We aren’t told why the other disciples are clueless, but once Peter believes it is indeed Jesus on the shore, how does he react?

¹ This lesson is copyrighted by Dr. Rick Jordan, Great Bible Teachers, Inc, 2025. More lessons may be found at greatbibleteachers.com.

What does this say about Peter? What does it say about the other disciples - that they did not dive out of the boat as well?

[Write on the board, “Jesus offers...”]

In this story, we are going to have three things that Jesus offers in his post-resurrection appearances. The first thing offered is his presence.

[Write “Presence” under the words “Jesus offers...”]

What are some things about Jesus’ presence that we can surmise from this story thus far? (Jesus’ presence is unpredictable; Jesus’ presence indicates his concern for us; Jesus’ presence has power; etc.)

Another thing Jesus offers in this post-resurrection is Provision.

[Write “Provision” under the word “Presence”]

What did Jesus provide the disciples? (lots of fish) Besides the fish, on a deeper level, what did Jesus offer and provide? (companionship, hope, assurance, Jesus knows more than we know, etc.)

- Have a class member read John 21:9-14.

Jesus has a little campfire with some fish and bread. Jesus is present and he is providing breakfast. But not *all* of breakfast. He asks the disciples to bring some of their fish to him.

Could Jesus have made the disciples’ task easy by having the fish jump into the boat? Could Jesus have provided all the breakfast fish, cooked and ready to serve? Why do you think he did not do that?

[Write “Partnership” under “Provision.”]

Jesus offers us partnership.

How is partnership portrayed in this passage? What are some principles we can draw from it? (What we have are gifts from God; God expects us to bring something to the table, etc.)

Here’s an interesting factoid: Ancient people thought there were 153 different kinds of fish. Each one was represented and included in the catch. God offers presence, provision, and partnership to everyone.

In our second story, the images change. We are going from one kind of animal to another. And, we are moving from what Jesus *offers to* us to what Jesus *asks of* us.

- Have a class member read John 21:15-17.

[Write on the board, “Jesus asks...”]

Jesus asks Peter a question. “Do you love me?”

[Write “Love” under the words “Jesus asks...”]

How many times does Jesus ask this of Peter? (three times)

Why does he keep asking this question? (to make a real point; because Peter is not answering wholeheartedly; because Peter had denied Jesus three times, etc.)

Many commentators make much of the fact that in the Greek text, Jesus and Peter use different words for “love”. “Agapeo” is the word for an ultimate, self-sacrificial love. “Phileo” is the word for a deep friendship. Thus,

Jesus: *agapas me* ("Do you love me?")

Peter: *philo se* ("I love you.")

Jesus: *agapas me* ("Do you love me?")

Peter: *philo se* ("I love you.")

Jesus: *phileis me* ("Do you love me?")

Peter: *philo se* ("I love you.")

However, at least one scholar points out that John often uses these two words interchangeably.

“For example, both verbs are used to speak of ‘the disciple whom Jesus loved’ (*agapao*, 13:23; *phileo*, 20:2); God's love of Jesus (*agapao*, 10:17; *phileo*, 5:20); God's love for the disciples (*agapao*, 14:23; *phileo*, 16:27); and the disciples' love of Jesus (*agapao*, 14:23; *phileo*, 16:27). There is no reason, therefore, to ascribe gradations of meaning to their usage here (as the NIV does). The Evangelist's propensity for synonyms is also evident in the variation ‘lambs’ / ‘sheep’ and ‘feed’ / ‘tend.’”²

So, the point may not be the intensity of love. Jesus *is* asking for a love that will not deny him.

Jesus is asking for love. And, he gives Peter a command, “feed my sheep.”

Think of the context: Jesus has just fed his disciples – his sheep, his little flock – on the beach. Now, he asks Peter to be a partner in that feeding.

[Write “Partnership” under the word “Love”.]

The Gospel of John does not have a Great Commission, but this comes close to it. “Join me in my work, feeding my sheep.” In last week’s lesson, Jesus appears to the disciples and asks them to be partners in loving the world.

² Gail O’Day, *John*, The New Interpreter’s Bible (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 860.

- Have a class member read John 20:20-21.

Jesus asks his disciples to love him with such depth that they will not deny him. Jesus asks his disciples to accept this commission – to go out into the world as Jesus was sent out into the world. In today’s story, we have one more “ask” from Jesus.

- Have a class member read John 21:18-19.

[Write on the board, “Follow me” under the word “Partnership”.]

Following Jesus is an awesome experience, but there may be unpleasant consequences. Sometimes, we take unpopular stands. Sometimes, we are scoffed at for believing love is better than hate, peace is better than war, and that “it is better to give than to receive.”

[Distribute the article, “William Barber arrested for praying in Capitol Rotunda.” A couple of North Carolinian ministers made the news this week for being arrested as they prayed against a budget that would harm “the least of these.”]

Comments?

Peter was martyred. That won’t be the way our lives end, probably. But there may be smaller sacrifices we are called to make as persons who love God, trust in God, and partner with God.

Transformational Exercise

Let’s listen again to these two stories, paying attention to what God provides for us and to what God asks of us.

As I read, you may want to be looking at the board at these words, or you may want to focus on the reading while closing your eyes.

[Read John 21:1-19]

[Close in a prayer something like this:] *In the season of Easter, we thank you, God, for the resurrection of Jesus Christ. We thank you that Jesus did not simply rise, then disappear, but visited with his disciples many times. We pray you will give us pure, loving spirits that are eager to partner with you. Amen.*