

Call and Growth

Matt 4:18-20; 16:16-18; John 21:15-18; 2 Peter 3:14-15, 18
SS Lesson for 01/25/2026

Devotional Scriptures: Gal 2:8-9

OUTLINE

LESSON BACKGROUND AND KEY VERSE

Background from the NIV Standard Lesson Commentary
Key Verse: John 21:17

MAJOR THEME ANALYSIS

PETER'S CALL (MATT 4:18-20)

Call during daily activities (18)

- God called Peter, James and John while they were fishing (Luke 5:1-11)
- God called Samuel while he was sleep (1 Sam 3:7-10)
- God called Matthew while he was collecting taxes (Luke 5:27-28)
- God called the widow through Elijah while she was preparing her last meal (1 Kings 17:7-16)

Call to follow Jesus (19)

- Following Jesus must become our first priority (Matt 8:22)
- Following Jesus is a requirement for being a Christian (Matt 10:38)
- Following Jesus means denying ourself (Matt 16:24)
- Following Jesus is serving Him (John 12:26)

Call that prompted an immediate response (20)

- Immediate response must not be delayed (Luke 9:61-62)
- Immediate response is required to receive results (Acts 9:34)
- Immediate response as an opportunity to be obedient to God (Ps 90:12)

PETER'S PROCLAMATION (MATT 16:16-18)

Proclamation of being Son of God (16)

- Son of God because of the miracles He performed (Matt 14:28-33)
- Son of God because of His activities on the cross (Matt 27:54)
- Son of God because the gospel teaches it (Rom 1:2-5)
- Son of God because Jesus lives within believers (Gal 2:20)

Proclamation revealed by God (17)

- Revealed by God as a revelation (Gal 1:11-12)
- Revealed by God to teach and preach about the Jesus (Gal 1:15-16)
- Revealed by God through the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 2:10-11)
- Revealed by God to understand the mystery of Christ (Eph 3:4-5)

Proclamation that the church is built on (18)

- A Church that bears fruit (Col 1:5-6)
- A Church whose people are God's building (1 Cor 3:9)
- A Church that is courageous and full of hope (Heb 3:6)

PETER'S MINISTRY (JOHN 21:15-18)

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- A love that comes from God (1 John 4:8-10)
- A love that is one of the fruit of the Holy Spirit (Gal 5:22-23)
- A love that is obedience to God (2 John 6)
- A love that never fails (1 Cor 13:4-8)

Ministry that shepherds (17)

- A shepherd of the church (Acts 20:28)
- A shepherd that cares and serves the flock (1 Peter 5:2)
- A shepherd that directs the affairs of the church (1 Tim 5:17)
- A shepherd keeps watch over the flock (Heb 13:17)

Ministry that contains suffering (18)

- Suffering that produces perseverance (Rom 5:3)
- Suffering for what is believed and entrusted (2 Tim 1:11-12)
- Suffering so that joy may be felt when Jesus' glory is revealed (1 Peter 4:12-14)
- Suffering as co-heirs with Jesus (Rom 8:17)

PETER'S TEACHING (2 PETER 3:14-15, 18)

Teaching to be peaceful and obedient (14)

Peaceful by aiming for peace (2 Cor 13:11)

Peaceful through promotion of peace (Prov 12:20)

Peaceful through peacemakers (Matt 5:9)

Peaceful through overcoming the world (John 16:33)

Teaching about the salvation of Jesus (15)

Salvation that comes from the sanctification through faith (Acts 26:16-18)

Salvation for everyone who believes (Rom 1:16)

Salvation for those baptized in Jesus (Gal 3:26-29)

Salvation through the gospel (Eph 3:6)

Teaching based on the grace and knowledge of Jesus (18)

Knowledge of Jesus that surpasses greatness (Phil 3:8)

Knowledge of Jesus' crucifixion (1 Cor 2:2)

Knowledge of Jesus through the Spirit of wisdom and revelation (Eph 1:17)

Knowledge of Jesus and his resurrection and fellowship (Phil 3:10)

CONCLUSION AND OTHER THOUGHTS

COMMENTARY THOUGHTS FROM BOB DEFFINBAUGH

From Fish to Sheep, From Catching to Caring For (21:15-23)

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS FROM THE NIV STANDARD LESSON COMMENTARY

Lesson Background and Key Verse

Background from the NIV Standard Lesson Commentary

Today's lesson explores the life, call, and ministry of one such first-century fisherman, Simon Peter. He left the waters (and fishing boats) of the Sea of Galilee to become a disciple of Jesus. Peter's discipleship to Jesus was full of ups and downs, yet God used Peter to ensure the growth and spread of the first-century church.

Simon Peter was from Bethsaida (John 1:44), a village on the northern shore of the Sea of Galilee. Here, he worked as a fisherman with his brother Andrew (Mark 1:16). Their fishing operation was a partnership with James and John, the sons of Zebedee (Luke 5:10). Peter was married (Mark 1:30; 1 Corinthians 9:5). At some point, Peter, his wife, and at least one other family member moved to Capernaum (Matthew 8:5-14), a town approximately five miles southwest of Bethsaida. The New Testament notes three names for Peter. His Hebrew name is Simon or the variant Simeon (Mark 1:16; Acts 15:14). Later, Jesus calls him Peter, a designation based on an ancient Greek word meaning "rock" or "stone" (Matthew 16:18; Mark 3:16); this is his most frequently occurring name in the New Testament, found over 160 times. The third name is Cephas, an Aramaic word for "stone" (John 1:42; 1 Corinthians 1:12; 3:22; etc.).

Key Verse: John 21:17

He said to him the third time, "Simon, son of Jonah, 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, "Feed My sheep.

Major Theme Analysis

(Scriptural Text from the New King James Version; cross-references from the NIV)

Peter's Call (Matt 4:18-20)

18 And Jesus, walking by the Sea of Galilee, saw two brothers, Simon called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea; for they were fishermen.

19 Then He said to them, "Follow Me, and I will make you fishers of men."

20 They immediately left their nets and followed Him.

Call during daily activities (18)

God called Peter, James and John while they were fishing (Luke 5:1-11)

1 One day as Jesus was standing by the Lake of Gennesaret, with the people crowding around him and listening to the word of God, 2 he saw at the water's edge two boats, left there by the fishermen, who were washing their nets. 3 He got into one of the boats, the one belonging to Simon, and asked him to put out a little from shore. Then he sat down and taught the people from the boat. 4 When he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, "Put out into deep water, and let down the nets for a catch." 5 Simon answered, "Master, we've worked hard all night and haven't caught anything. But because you say so, I will let down the nets." 6 When they had done so, they caught such a large number of fish that their nets began to break. 7 So they signaled their partners in the other boat to come and help them, and they came and filled both boats so full that they began to sink. 8 When Simon Peter saw this, he fell at Jesus' knees and said, "Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man!" 9 For he and all his companions were astonished at the catch of fish they had taken, 10 and so were James and John, the sons of Zebedee, Simon's partners. Then Jesus said to Simon, "Don't be afraid; from now on you will catch men." 11 So they pulled their boats up on shore, left everything and followed him.

God called Samuel while he was sleep (1 Sam 3:7-10)

7 Now Samuel did not yet know the Lord: The word of the Lord had not yet been revealed to him. 8 The Lord called Samuel a third time, and Samuel got up and went to Eli and said, "Here I am; you called me." Then Eli realized that the Lord was calling the boy. 9 So Eli told Samuel, "Go and lie down, and if he calls you, say, 'Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.'" So Samuel went and lay down in his place. 10 The Lord came and stood there, calling as at the other times, "Samuel! Samuel!" Then Samuel said, "Speak, for your servant is listening."

God called Matthew while he was collecting taxes (Luke 5:27-28)

27 After this, Jesus went out and saw a tax collector by the name of Levi sitting at his tax booth. "Follow me," Jesus said to him, 28 and Levi got up, left everything and followed him.

God called the widow through Elijah while she was preparing her last meal (1 Kings 17:7-16)

7 Some time later the brook dried up because there had been no rain in the land. 8 Then the word of the Lord came to him: 9 "Go at once to Zarephath of Sidon and stay there. I have commanded a widow in that place to supply you with food." 10 So he went to Zarephath. When he came to the town gate, a widow was there gathering sticks. He called to her and asked, "Would you bring me a little water in a jar so I may have a drink?" 11 As she was going to get it, he called, "And bring me, please, a piece of bread." 12 "As surely as the Lord your God lives," she replied, "I don't have any bread — only a handful of flour in a jar and a little oil in a jug. I am gathering a few sticks to take home and make a meal for myself and my son, that we may eat it — and die." 13 Elijah said to her, "Don't be afraid. Go home and do as you have said. But first make a small cake of bread for me from what you have and bring it to me, and then make something for yourself and your son. 14 For this is what the Lord, the God of Israel, says: 'The jar of flour will not be used up and the jug of oil will not run dry until the day the Lord gives rain on the land.'" 15 She went away and did as Elijah had told her. So there was food every day for Elijah and for the woman and her family. 16 For the jar of flour was not used up and the jug of oil did not run dry, in keeping with the word of the Lord spoken by Elijah.

Call to follow Jesus (19)

Following Jesus must become our first priority (Matt 8:22)

22 But Jesus told him, "Follow me, and let the dead bury their own dead."

Following Jesus is a requirement for being a Christian (Matt 10:38)

38 and anyone who does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me.

Following Jesus means denying ourselves (Matt 16:24)

24 Then Jesus said to his disciples, "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.

Following Jesus is serving Him (John 12:26)

26 Whoever serves me must follow me; and where I am, my servant also will be. My Father will honor the one who serves me.

Call that prompted an immediate response (20)

Immediate response must not be delayed (Luke 9:61-62)

61 Still another said, "I will follow you, Lord; but first let me go back and say good-by to my family." 62 Jesus replied, "No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God."

Immediate response is required to receive results (Acts 9:34)

34 "Aeneas," Peter said to him, "Jesus Christ heals you. Get up and take care of your mat." Immediately Aeneas got up.

Immediate response as an opportunity to be obedient to God (Ps 90:12)

12 Teach us to number our days aright, that we may gain a heart of wisdom.

Peter's Proclamation (Matt 16:16-18)

16 Simon Peter answered and said, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."

17 Jesus answered and said to him, "Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah, for flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but My Father who is in heaven.

18 And I also say to you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it.

Proclamation of being Son of God (16)

Son of God because of the miracles He performed (Matt 14:28-33)

28 "Lord, if it's you," Peter replied, "tell me to come to you on the water." 29 "Come," he said. Then Peter got down out of the boat, walked on the water and came toward Jesus. 30 But when he saw the wind, he was afraid and, beginning to sink, cried out, "Lord, save me!" 31 Immediately Jesus reached out his hand and caught him. "You of little faith," he said, "why did you doubt?" 32 And when they climbed into the boat, the wind died down. 33 Then those who were in the boat worshiped him, saying, "Truly you are the Son of God."

Son of God because of His activities on the cross (Matt 27:54)

54 When the centurion and those with him who were guarding Jesus saw the earthquake and all that had happened, they were terrified, and exclaimed, "Surely he was the Son of God!"

Son of God because the gospel teaches it (Rom 1:2-5)

2 the gospel he promised beforehand through his prophets in the Holy Scriptures 3 regarding his Son, who as to his human nature was a descendant of David, 4 and who through the Spirit of holiness was declared with power to be the Son of God by his resurrection from the dead: Jesus Christ our Lord. 5 Through him and for his name's sake, we received grace and apostleship to call people from among all the Gentiles to the obedience that comes from faith.

Son of God because Jesus lives within believers (Gal 2:20)

20 I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.

Proclamation revealed by God (17)

Revealed by God as a revelation (Gal 1:11-12)

11 I want you to know, brothers, that the gospel I preached is not something that man made up. 12 I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it; rather, I received it by revelation from Jesus Christ.

Revealed by God to teach and preach about the Jesus (Gal 1:15-16)

15 But when God, who set me apart from birth and called me by his grace, was pleased 16 to reveal his Son in me so that I might preach him among the Gentiles, I did not consult any man

Revealed by God through the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 2:10-11)

10 but God has revealed it to us by his Spirit. The Spirit searches all things, even the deep things of God. 11 For who among men knows the thoughts of a man except the man's spirit within him? In the same way no one knows the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God.

Revealed by God to understand the mystery of Christ (Eph 3:4-5)

4 In reading this, then, you will be able to understand my insight into the mystery of Christ, 5 which was not made known to men in other generations as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to God's holy apostles and prophets.

Proclamation that the church is built on (18)

A Church that bears fruit (Col 1:5-6)

5 the faith and love that spring from the hope that is stored up for you in heaven and that you have already heard about in the word of truth, the gospel 6 that has come to you. All over the world this gospel is bearing fruit and growing, just as it has been doing among you since the day you heard it and understood God's grace in all its truth.

A Church whose people are God's building (1 Cor 3:9)

9 For we are God's fellow workers; you are God's field, God's building.

A Church that is courageous and full of hope (Heb 3:6)

6 But Christ is faithful as a son over God's house. And we are his house, if we hold on to our courage and the hope of which we boast.

Peter's Ministry (John 21:15-18)

15 So when they had eaten breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon, son of Jonah, 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."

16 He said to him again a second time, "Simon, son of Jonah, do you love Me?" He said to Him, "Yes, Lord; You know that I love You." He said to him, "Tend My sheep."

17 He said to him the third time, "Simon, son of Jonah, 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, "Feed My sheep."

18 Most assuredly, I say to you, when you were younger, you girded yourself and walked where you wished; but when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and another will gird you and carry you where you do not wish."

Ministry built on love (15-16)

A love that comes from God (1 John 4:8-10)

8 Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love. 9 This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. 10 This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.

A love that is one of the fruit of the Holy Spirit (Gal 5:22-23)

22 But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, 23 gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law.

A love that is obedience to God (2 John 6)

6 And this is love: that we walk in obedience to his commands. As you have heard from the beginning, his command is that you walk in love.

A love that never fails (1 Cor 13:4-8)

4 Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. 5 It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. 6 Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. 7 It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. 8 Love never fails. But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away.

Ministry that shepherds (17)

A shepherd of the church (Acts 20:28)

28 Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood.

A shepherd that cares and serves the flock (1 Peter 5:2)

2 Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, serving as overseers — not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not greedy for money, but eager to serve;

A shepherd that directs the affairs of the church (1 Tim 5:17)

17 The elders who direct the affairs of the church well are worthy of double honor, especially those whose work is preaching and teaching.

A shepherd keeps watch over the flock (Heb 13:17)

17 Obey your leaders and submit to their authority. They keep watch over you as men who must give an account. Obey them so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no advantage to you.

Ministry that contains suffering (18)

Suffering that produces perseverance (Rom 5:3)

3 Not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance;

Suffering for what is believed and entrusted (2 Tim 1:11-12)

11 And of this gospel I was appointed a herald and an apostle and a teacher. 12 That is why I am suffering as I am. Yet I am not ashamed, because I know whom I have believed, and am convinced that he is able to guard what I have entrusted to him for that day.

Suffering so that joy may be felt when Jesus' glory is revealed (1 Peter 4:12-14)

12 Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you. 13 But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed. 14 If you are insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you.

Suffering as co-heirs with Jesus (Rom 8:17)

17 Now if we are children, then we are heirs — heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory.

Peter's Teaching (2 Peter 3:14-15, 18)

14 Therefore, beloved, looking forward to these things, be diligent to be found by Him in peace, without spot and blameless;

15 and consider that the longsuffering of our Lord is salvation — as also our beloved brother Paul, according to the wisdom given to him, has written to you,

18 but grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To Him be the glory both now and forever. Amen.

Teaching to be peaceful and obedient (14)

Peaceful by aiming for peace (2 Cor 13:11)

11 Finally, brothers, good-by. Aim for perfection, listen to my appeal, be of one mind, live in peace. And the God of love and peace will be with you.

Peaceful through promotion of peace (Prov 12:20)

20 There is deceit in the hearts of those who plot evil, but joy for those who promote peace.

Peaceful through peacemakers (Matt 5:9)

9 Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God.

Peaceful through overcoming the world (John 16:33)

33 "I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world."

Teaching about the salvation of Jesus (15)

Salvation that comes from the sanctification through faith (Acts 26:16-18)

16 'Now get up and stand on your feet. I have appeared to you to appoint you as a servant and as a witness of what you have seen of me and what I will show you. 17 I will rescue you from your own people and from the Gentiles. I am sending you to them 18 to open their eyes and turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me.'

Salvation for everyone who believes (Rom 1:16)

16 I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile.

Salvation for those baptized in Jesus (Gal 3:26-29)

26 You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, 27 for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. 28 There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. 29 If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise.

Salvation through the gospel (Eph 3:6)

6 This mystery is that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus.

Teaching based on the grace and knowledge of Jesus (18)

Knowledge of Jesus that surpasses greatness (Phil 3:8)

8 What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ

Knowledge of Jesus' crucifixion (1 Cor 2:2)

2 For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.

Knowledge of Jesus through the Spirit of wisdom and revelation (Eph 1:17)

17 I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better.

Knowledge of Jesus and his resurrection and fellowship (Phil 3:10)

10 I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death,

Conclusion and Other Thoughts

Commentary Thoughts from Bob Deffinbaugh

From Fish to Sheep, From Catching to Caring For (21:15-23)

I am inclined to understand verses 1-14 in terms of evangelism—being fishers of men. But it is not enough to simply bring a lost sinner to faith in Jesus Christ; that person should also be discipled, and thus brought to maturity in Christ. This seems to be implicit in the Great Commission:

18 Then Jesus came up and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. 19 Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, 20 teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age” (Matthew 28:18-20).

As we approach these very familiar verses in John's Gospel, it seems necessary to make a few introductory comments about this text:

First, in my opinion, Jesus is not seeking to correct (or even rebuke) Peter here for his three-fold denial. Jesus personally revealed Himself to Peter, probably before He appeared to the disciples as a group (1 Corinthians 15:5; Luke 24:34; Mark 16:7). I believe it is there that our Lord dealt with Peter's three-fold denial, and forgave him. In our text, Peter is eager to be with our Lord. I believe this is because Peter's sins have already been confronted and forgiven, and thus he has already been restored to fellowship with the Master.

Second, I certainly do not agree with Roman Catholicism's interpretation and application of this text, which seeks to establish the primacy of Peter as the first pope. D. A. Carson writes: “Matthew 16:13-20 certainly establishes a unique role for Peter in the founding of the church. ... 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.”²⁰⁷

Third, I am not even inclined to see this text as Peter's restoration to leadership. There are some scholars who hold that Peter was restored to fellowship in his private interview with Jesus, and that this incident is his public restoration to leadership. I see the emphasis of this passage falling on humble service, not on leadership, per se.

Fourth, this passage is more about love than about leadership. Love for Jesus is demonstrated by faithfully caring for His sheep. Let me attempt to illustrate this. The nation is at war, and a son receives notification that he has been drafted into the armed forces. The son ships out, leaving his loving parents behind. He also leaves behind his most prized possession, a 1930 Ford Model A coupe. Do you think that the father of this son will simply allow that car to sit out in the weather, unattended? Do you think he will now use it to haul his trash to the dump? No; the father will wash and wax and tenderly care for that car, because it is the expression of his love for his son, in the son's absence. So, too, when we care for the sheep whom our Lord loves, and for whom He gave His life, we show our love for the Shepherd.

Fifth, caution should be exercised in making too much of the two different words for “love” which are employed in this text. The two verbs are *agapao* and *phileo*. The first two times Jesus asks Peter if he loves Him, the word for love is *agapao*. The third time Jesus asks, He employs the term *phileo*. Every time Peter responds to Jesus' question, indicating his love, he employs the word *phileo*. The distinctions that some make between these two terms may hold true in some cases, and for some authors. They do not seem to hold true for John, who often uses different terms for the same concept. When commentators do seek to emphasize the distinctions between the two Greek words John uses, they do not agree as to what the meaning and emphasis of

these terms are. We should keep in mind that when Jesus spoke to Peter and asked him these three questions, He spoke not in Greek (the language in which the Gospel of John is written), but in Aramaic, the language spoken by the Jews of that day. The change in words may have some significance, but I hardly think it is the key to understanding the passage.

When they had finished breakfast, Jesus turned to Simon Peter and asked, “**Simon, son of John, do you love Me more than these do?**”²⁰⁸ Our Lord’s addition of the words, “**more than these do,**” really got to the heart of the matter. Our Lord’s prediction of Peter’s denials came in the midst of Peter’s confident boasting that even if all the others denied Jesus, he certainly would not. In other words, Peter was claiming a higher level of devotion than the rest. Jesus is simply asking him to re-evaluate his boastful claim. And this Peter did. Peter could truthfully affirm that he did love Jesus, but he would not go so far as to claim that his love was greater than that of his fellow-disciples. He also speaks of his love in terms of the Savior’s assessment of it: “**Yes, Lord, You know I love You.**” To this our Lord replied, “**Feed My lambs.**”

How Peter wished that Jesus would leave it at that. But Jesus will ask the question two more times, so that this conversation is understood in relation to that occasion when Peter denied his Master three times.²⁰⁹ And so Jesus asks Peter a second time, “**Simon, son of John, do you love Me?**” Peter replies with the identical words he spoke in answer to the first question, “**Yes, Lord, You know I love You.**” Jesus responded, “**Shepherd My sheep.**”

It was when Jesus asked the same question the third time that Peter was deeply grieved, “**Simon, son of John, do you love Me?**” It was not that Jesus changed from *agapao* to *phileo* that troubled Peter. Peter was grieved because Jesus found it necessary to ask virtually the same question three times. I do not like to be asked the same question repeatedly. I conclude that either the person asking the question wasn’t paying attention (this could not be the case with Jesus), or that my answer was not acceptable or credible. The three-fold repetition must have registered with Peter as being related to his three-fold denial. Peter was grieved because he realized that the bold and even arrogant claims he had made proved to be empty. Peter is not distressed with Jesus; he is grieved over his own sin. Jesus is not attempting to shame Peter; he is seeking to reaffirm his call to service. Did Jesus question Peter about his love for Him three times? Then note that three times Jesus instructed Peter to care for His sheep. Does Peter fear he has been cast aside as useless? Jesus tells him to return to His²¹⁰ work, three times!

Peter really did love Jesus. But Peter needed to understand that his love for the Savior was not as great as he thought, just as his ability to catch fish was not as great as he seemed to think. In loving, and in landing fish, Jesus was supreme. Even in the thing Peter did best (fishing), he could not hold a candle to Jesus, who proved to be far better at fishing than he. Peter sought to prove his love for Jesus by boasting about it, by arguing with his fellow-disciples about it (see Luke 22:24), and by being the first to draw his sword and lop off an ear, or perhaps even by being the first man into the water and onto the shore. These were not the benchmarks our Lord had established for testing one’s love for Him. The proof of one’s love for God is *sacrificial service*²¹¹—feeding our Lord’s sheep.

The way I understand verses 15-19 is something like this: “Peter, do you really love Me as much as you say? Then prove your love for Me by taking care of My sheep.” Jesus is the “**Good Shepherd,**” Who cares for His sheep (see John 10). If Peter really loves his Lord, then his passion will be the Lord’s passion. Jesus came to be the “**Good Shepherd.**” If Peter really loves the Lord, he will be a good shepherd, and shepherds shepherd by feeding the lambs, by caring for the weakest and most vulnerable of the flock. Jesus is the “**Good Shepherd**”; He is the Shepherd who came to lay down His life for His sheep. If Peter really loves Jesus, he will care for the Master’s sheep, and he, like the Master, will lay down his life for the sheep. Love manifests itself in service—humble, sacrificial, service.

You become like the people you love. The things they love, you love. If Peter really loves his Lord, Who is the Good Shepherd, then Peter will surely seek to shepherd in the same way. He will seek the lost sheep (evangelism). He will feed and tend the young and vulnerable lambs (discipleship). And, like the Good Shepherd, he will lay down his life for the sheep. That is why the Lord moves so quickly and easily from verses 15-17 to verses 18 and 19. Peter had assured his Lord that he was willing to die for Him (Matthew 26:35), and so he will. But he will not die in the manner that he once supposed—seeking to keep His Master from being arrested and crucified. Peter will die, as the Savior did, as a good shepherd, and for the sake of the gospel.

Notice that Jesus does much more than predict Peter’s death. John wishes us to understand that Jesus went so far as to predict the way in which Peter would die: “**(Now Jesus said this to indicate clearly by what kind of death Peter was going to glorify God.)**” (verse 19). Peter’s previous effort to resist the arrest of Jesus was contrary to the gospel, and this is why Jesus rebuked him and abruptly ordered him to stop resisting His arrest.

The death which Peter will experience is a death that will glorify God. Jesus also indicates that Peter will die in his old age, and thus he is informed that his death is not imminent. But his death for the Savior's sake is certain: "I tell you the solemn truth, when you were young, you tied your clothes around you and went wherever you wanted, but when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and others will tie you up and bring you where you do not want to go" (verse 18). Some see in these words only a vague and general reference to the manner of Peter's death, but this does not square with John's explanation in verse 19, which seems to be a more specific prophecy. I agree with those who see here a prophecy that Peter truly will follow Jesus, by dying on a Roman cross:

More important is the way *stretch out your hands* was understood in the ancient world: it widely referred to crucifixion (Haenchen, 2. 226-227). ... Bauer (p. 232) proposed long ago that this 'stretching' took place when a condemned prisoner was tied to his cross-member ... 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.²¹²

The words, "**Follow Me**," constitute the first calling of the disciples (Matthew 4:19; Mark 1:17; John 1:43). As time passed, these words took on a much deeper meaning. Following Jesus meant putting Jesus above family (Matthew 8:22). It meant a whole new way of life, where former practices would be unacceptable (Matthew 9:9; Mark 2:14). Before long, Jesus let His disciples know that following Him meant taking up one's cross (Matthew 16:24; Mark 8:34). (At this point in time, our Lord's reference to "taking up one's cross" was, at best, understood metaphorically.) For the rich young ruler, it meant giving up his possessions (Matthew 19:21; Mark 20:21). And now, for Peter, it means not only carrying on the Master's work, but taking up a very literal cross. It would seem that at every point where following Jesus is more precisely defined, another challenge to follow Him is given. So it is in our text.

I fear that Christians today understand these two words, "Follow me," in a most shallow and superficial way. When Paul writes, "**For to me to live is Christ and to die is gain**" (Philippians 1:21), we interpret his words in a somewhat hedonistic fashion. We suppose that Paul means living as a Christian is glorious, trouble-free, and fulfilling. It is, to put it plainly, "the good life." In other words, we get to live it up here, and then when we die, it gets even better. There is a certain sense in which this is true. But we must understand Paul's words in the light of what Jesus is telling Peter here, in our text, about following Him. To follow Christ is to walk in His steps, to live as He lived, to serve others as He did, and to lay down your life for the sheep, like Him. In Philippians chapter 1, Paul is therefore saying, "For me, to live is to live just as Christ did, taking up my cross daily, laying down my life for His sheep."

Peter got the message. He was willing to lay down his life for the Savior. But why was Jesus singling him out? What about the rest? What about John? At some point, it appears that Jesus and Peter have gone off by themselves, apart from the others. Verse 20 seems to indicate that Jesus and Peter are walking by themselves, with John following behind, at a distance. Peter turns around and sees John, some distance away. He and John had been closely associated in the fishing business, and even as disciples. Later, they will work very closely together as apostles, as we see in the Book of Acts. Peter could not resist asking Jesus about John's fate. If Peter had to die to follow Jesus, was this also true of John?

When I was growing up, I had two sisters and one brother. I was especially competitive with my older sister. Whenever we had pie, you had better believe that she and I were eyeing each piece, to make sure that the other didn't get a bigger piece than we did. We had such a keenly developed sense of weight and size that we could have worked for the Federal Bureau of Standards. We did not wish for our rival sibling to get more than what we got. We expected complete equality. Peter seems to have the same attitude toward suffering. If he had to suffer, then surely John should be expected to suffer in just the same way, for the same period of time.

How easy it is for us to stand back, far removed in space and time, and criticize Peter for his foolish words. Let us remember that Peter does not have the depth of field that we have. He has not yet come to grasp the full impact of the death, burial, and resurrection of our Lord. He has not yet experienced the presence and power of the Holy Spirit, Who will come shortly, at Pentecost. Peter cannot yet look upon dying for Christ as a high calling, as a privilege. He views it only as a sacrifice, and thus he wishes to be sure that every other disciple pays the same price.

It occurred to me (later than I would wish to admit) that by the time John was writing this Gospel, Peter was probably already dead. If this is the case, then what is John's purpose in writing about this incident? It is clearly not for Peter's benefit. John tells us his reason for writing about this. It was to clear up the misconception some had that John would not die before the coming of our Lord. Jesus did not say that John would be alive at His return. He simply told Peter that if it was His will that he (Peter) die, and that John remain alive until His return,

that was of no concern to Peter—it was none of his business. Death, like everything else, falls within the boundaries of our Lord’s sovereign control of all things. If death is God’s business, His *sovereign* business, then it is not Peter’s business to raise questions about John’s death.²¹³

Peter was guilty of giving too much attention to John, when our Lord had narrowed the focus of the discussion to Peter’s love, and Peter’s service. Jesus further indicated to Peter that he would glorify his Master by his death, a death that was similar to His death, a death by crucifixion. Peter had fixed his attention on John. From John’s words here, we know that others erred in the same way Peter had. It was a popular misconception that Jesus promised John that he would not die until His return. It was only that—a popular misconception—and John corrects it here.

As I have been studying this final chapter in John’s Gospel, I re-read 1 Peter and was impressed with the way John 21 and 1 Peter were so similar in their themes. Peter certainly “got the message” Jesus was giving him here. But I also had to remind myself that John 21 was not written by Peter; it was written by John! Then it struck me—if I didn’t constantly remind myself of the fact, I would tend to forget that John wrote the Gospel of John. John is writing this chapter, and he is even a character in this closing scene, but he is completely in the background. I believe this is just the way John wanted it.

In fact, this is the way it is throughout the Gospel of John. John does not refer to himself by name, but rather as “**the one Jesus loved**.” Notice that John never refers to himself as “the one who loved Jesus.” Of course he loved Jesus, but then he had heard Peter boast the same thing. Better to focus on the great, unfailing love our Lord has for us, than our feeble, fickle love for Him. Good decision, John! And keep in mind that of all the Gospel authors, only Matthew and John were one of the twelve. Only John was one of the inner three—Peter, James, and John—who witnessed some things to which the other nine were not privy. You would think, would you not, that John would be more than eager to write about some of those events in our Lord’s life, where he was one of the privileged few to be present, and to witness such great things? There was the transfiguration of our Lord, for example (Matthew 17:1; Mark 9:2; Luke 9:29), the raising of the synagogue ruler’s dead daughter (Mark 5:37), and the prayer of our Lord in the Garden of Gethsemane (Mark 14:33). In each case, only the inner three were present, as stated in the Synoptic Gospels. And yet none of these incidents is even mentioned by John. John refuses to place himself in the spotlight. What an amazing man he is! Peter may be overly concerned about John (as he is), and so may those others who wrongly supposed that he would not die, but John himself is not so taken with himself. John keeps the focus on our Lord, and on the truths He spoke. Our eyes should not be on ourselves, but on Christ. Our focus should not be on what others are doing for Christ, or what God is doing for them. Our focus should be on Him, and on our love for Him, as shown by our loving service to His flock.

This is the “Great Commission” of John’s Gospel. It is certainly different from the Great Commission of Matthew’s Gospel. But when you stop to think about it, the point of both Gospels is the same. Matthew emphasizes the authority of our Lord, and the Lord’s command to make disciples. *John focuses on our love for the Lord, and the privilege we have to show our love for Him by caring for those He loves, in a way that is consistent with His sacrificial death at Calvary.*

One more thing should be said about the “**love**” which our Lord (and John) emphasizes in this closing chapter of John. We would do well to consider where John was when he penned this Gospel. The place of writing is not certain, but it is likely that it was Ephesus, which was apparently John’s home in his later years. Is it not interesting to think that when John writes his epistles, he places such emphasis on love? Is it not noteworthy that in the Book of Revelation, our Lord’s words to the church at Ephesus indicate that their great deficiency was that of love? And is it not noteworthy that when Paul wrote to Timothy, who was staying in Ephesus, he stated that the goal of his instruction was love (1 Timothy 1:5)? What a fitting way to end the Gospel of John, not by stressing the believer’s duty (which is very real, and very important), but by stressing the *believer’s love and sacrificial service*, the visible demonstration of that love.

(Adapted from URL:<https://bible.org/seriespage/what-thing-called-love-john-211-25>)

Concluding Thoughts from the NIV Standard Lesson Commentary

Peter’s life of discipleship took him from being a fisherman in Galilee to being a leader of the first-century church. He grew from being “unschooled” and “ordinary” (Acts 4:13) to being the author of the two letters that bear his name in the New Testament. But his growth process wasn’t a straight line that always trended upward! Neither will ours be. Even so, Jesus calls all who would claim to be his disciples to grow in his grace and knowledge—there are no exceptions. Peter’s story is encouraging in that regard. And as we grow, we will find it natural to invite others to join us on this journey as well. Expect it!