

Text: John 21:1-25¹

Series: *Life in His Name* – The Message of John’s Gospel

Title: Part 42 – Fish, Feed & Follow

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John 20:30-31 makes a great conclusion to John’s Gospel!

“Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.” John 20:30-31

But then John 21 comes as “one more thing...” Because chapter 20, verse 30-31 makes such a good ending, some people have suggested that the passage was later added to the Gospel. But I don’t think that that is necessary at all. In fact, chapter 21 answers a basic question that all believers in Jesus ask in one way or another: **“Now that I believe in Jesus, where do I go from here?”**

This final chapter is all about the mission that Jesus gives to those who believe in him and I think the mission presented here in John chapter 21 can be summarized in three words...

Fish, Feed & Follow

Let me expand it to this...

Jesus says to those who believe in him: “Catch Fish, Feed Sheep & Follow Me. That is your mission until I return!”

These three movements in the storyline, “Fish, Feed & Follow,” are all told through the life of a man who had failed Jesus miserably. The central disciple in all three of these movements is Simon Peter, a disciple who had profoundly failed Jesus during the time of Jesus’ greatest need. There is a deep and rich undercurrent of God’s grace flowing through this chapter. It’s the river of God’s grace poured into the life of a man who was a miserable failure; it’s the river of God’s grace for you and me this morning because in one way or another, we’ve all failed God.

Before the cross, as Jesus prepared his disciples to meet the challenges of his death on the cross, he told them that he was entering a phase of his ministry where he was going to have to go it alone. The Cross was his and his alone to bear. He said to them...

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“Where I am going you cannot come.” John 13:33

“Simon Peter said to him, ‘Lord, where are you going?’ Jesus answered him, ‘Where I am going you cannot follow me now, but you will follow afterward.’ Peter said to him, ‘Lord, why can I not follow you now? I will lay down my life for you.’ Jesus answered, ‘Will you lay down your life for me? Truly, truly, I say to you, the rooster will not crow till you have denied me three times.’” John 13:36-38

There are three important pieces of information in Jesus’ word to Peter that I want you to remember. It’s going to be important in understanding what Jesus says to Peter in chapter 21. First of all, notice that Jesus tells Peter that while he can’t follow Jesus now, “you will follow afterwards.” Secondly, take note that Peter boldly declares: “I will lay down my life for you.” And thirdly, notice Jesus’ prediction that Peter will deny Jesus “three times.” Keep those three pieces of information in mind for later.

Just hours after Jesus said these things to Peter, he was arrested and brought to trial before the religious and civil authorities in Jerusalem. As Jesus was being tried, Peter stood outside awaiting the verdict. A servant girl of the High Priest saw Peter and asked him if he was one of Jesus’ disciples. Peter said...

“I am not.” John 18:17

That was Peter’s first denial. John adds an important detail about the scene. It was night and it was cold. There were many other people in the courtyard and John tells us...

“Now the servants and officers had made a charcoal fire, because it was cold, and they were standing and warming themselves. Peter also was with them, standing and warming himself.” John 18:18

There’s a detail here I want you to notice. Notice the fire. Just take note that Peter was standing at “a charcoal fire” when he first denied Jesus whom he’d just vowed to defend with his life.

Peter is still standing at that fire when he’s asked a second time if he is one of Jesus’ disciples. With the warmth of the fire on his hands he declares...

“I am not.” John 18:25

Still standing at that charcoal fire, he’s asked a third time if he’s one of Jesus’ disciples.

“Peter again denied it, and at once a rooster crowed.” John 18:27

John doesn't tell us how Peter reacted to his realization that he's just denied his Lord three times. Does he have to? Matthew, Mark and Luke, all three tell us that Peter wept bitterly (Matthew 26:75; Luke 22:62) but its Marks description that I find most pitiable. He wrote...

“And he broke down and wept.” Mark 14:72

He “broke down” and cried. He was a broken man. At that moment I don't think there was a more despairing and defeated person in all the earth than Peter. He had failed his Lord! He had denied him when he needed his support the most!

Then, just hours later, Jesus was hanging on a cross, alone, as he told Peter he must. He bore Peter's sin on that cross, not just the sin of his denial but all of his sin, and all of your sin and all of my sin, too.

Then Jesus rose from the dead and appeared to all of the disciples, including Peter. There must have been a measure of healing for Peter in those meetings with the risen Jesus but there was more healing to come.

On the morning of Jesus' resurrection an angel had told the disciples...

**“behold, he is going before you to Galilee; there you will see him.”
Matthew 28:7**

And so they headed north, back to Galilee, back to where it had all begun with Jesus, back to where they had first met Jesus as they fished the waters of the Sea of Galilee, back to the place they called home.

But as Peter headed north, I believe his heart was still heavy with his denial. How could it not be? Jesus was alive, yes, but that didn't take away the shame of Peter's failure. Jesus was alive no thanks to him! If Peter had been faithful to Jesus, Jesus would still have died on the cross for his sin; he would still have risen from the dead to give him the promise of eternal life. No, the shame of Peter's denial was not reversed simply because Jesus was now alive.

Pastor Kent Hughes has written this observation about the passage we're about to read. Yes, Peter, had seen the risen Jesus...

But Peter was not all better. He had still failed his Lord, even denying he knew him! He doubted his own fidelity, his own ability to walk with Christ or minister to others. He wondered if he could ever be used again. He needed a touch, as we all do sometimes.

Do you need a touch from Jesus today? Are you burdened in your heart with the knowledge that you've failed your Lord this week, this month, this year, in

something you've done or something you've said or in something you should have done or said and didn't? Do you wonder whether Jesus can use you? Do you wonder whether Jesus even wants to be with you? Then come to this text with a hopeful heart. Pastor Hughes goes on...

God has used this very text to touch many of his sons and daughters. I have personally found it to be one of the most helpful passages in all of Scripture because it takes me back to the ground of my faith, helps me assess where I really am, and instructs me on how to set my life straight once more.²

I invite you to allow the river of God's grace to wash over you this morning as we read his Word. Paul describes it as...

"the washing of water with the word" Ephesians 5:26

Allow God's Word to cleanse, refresh, and restore you. This is the Word of God...

¹ After this Jesus revealed himself again to the disciples by the Sea of Tiberias [also called The Sea of Galilee], and he revealed himself in this way.

² Simon Peter, Thomas (called the Twin), Nathanael of Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two others of his disciples were together. ³ Simon Peter said to them, "I am going fishing." They said to him, "We will go with you." They went out and got into the boat, but that night they caught nothing.

⁴ Just as day was breaking, Jesus stood on the shore; yet the disciples did not know that it was Jesus. ⁵ Jesus said to them, "Children, do you have any fish?" They answered him, "No." ⁶ He said to them, "Cast the net on the right side of the boat, and you will find some." So they cast it, and now they were not able to haul it in, because of the quantity of fish. ⁷ That disciple whom Jesus loved therefore said to Peter, "It is the Lord!" When Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he put on his outer garment, for he was stripped for work, and threw himself into the sea. ⁸ The other disciples came in the boat, dragging the net full of fish, for they were not far from the land, but about a hundred yards off.

⁹ When they got out on land, they saw a charcoal fire in place, with fish laid out on it, and bread. ¹⁰ Jesus said to them, "Bring some of the fish that you have just caught." ¹¹ So Simon Peter went aboard and hauled the net ashore, full of large fish, 153 of them. And although there were so many, the net was not torn. ¹² Jesus said to them, "Come and have breakfast." Now none of the disciples dared ask him, "Who are you?" They knew it was

² Hughes, R. K. (1999). *John : That you may believe*. Preaching the Word (470–471). Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books.

the Lord. ¹³ **Jesus came and took the bread and gave it to them, and so with the fish.** ¹⁴ **This was now the third time that Jesus was revealed to the disciples after he was raised from the dead.**

“Catch Fish...”

It was on the shore of this lake that Peter had first met Jesus. He had been washing his nets while a crowd gathered to hear this new teacher, Jesus of Nazareth. The crowd had grown so large that Jesus was being pressed closer and closer to the water's edge. To avoid being pushed into the lake, he got into Peter's boat and asked him to push out a little from shore so that he could talk to the people who gathered on shore.

After Jesus had finished speaking, he told Peter to take the boat out into the deeper water and to put down his net in order to catch some fish. Peter answered...

“Master, we toiled all night and took nothing! But at your word I will let down the nets.” Luke 5:5

The net was immediately filled with fish, so many in fact, that Peter had to call his partners, James and John, to come alongside with their boat for fear that his would sink. Both boats filled with fish to the point where both began sinking. Peter, realized that something direct from the hand of God had just happened. He fell in worship at Jesus' feet.

“And Jesus said to Simon, ‘Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching men.’ And when they had brought their boats to land, they left everything and followed him.” Luke 5:10-11

Whenever you see the disciples catching fish in the Gospels they always need Jesus help. Not because they weren't good fishermen, but because fishing is a Gospel picture of evangelism. It's a picture of bringing people to believe in Jesus. It's a picture of the Father “drawing” people to faith in Jesus in the Gospel net.

Peter had left everything and had spent three years with Jesus, learning how to fish for people. He'd learned from Jesus the Bible's story about why God had sent Jesus, his Only Son, to be the Saviour of the world. He'd seen Jesus demonstrate his divine power in healing; he'd heard Jesus speak his divine wisdom on teaching. He'd been there when Jesus had died on the cross, the Lamb of God who took away the sin of the world. He'd been there when Jesus had risen from the dead to prove that the Father in heaven had given him authority to grant forgiveness of sins and eternal life to all those who would believe in him.

And now, three years later, he was on the same lake, with James and John, fishing. Not for people; just for fish. And again, just like before, they had caught nothing. A shadowy figure on shore asks them...

“Children, do you have any fish?” They answered him, “No.” John 21:5

That answer is key to the success that follows. They acknowledged their emptiness. All their skill had been useless. They were failures as fishermen. Then the man on shore tells them to let down their nets on the right side of the boat and they'll find fish. They do and just like the last time, the net is filled with fish! The moment they acknowledged their emptiness, Jesus answered and provided what they needed!

I believe that He's waiting for us to do the same thing. As long as we play the religious game and pretend that we're doing well when in reality we're empty and bankrupt, then our net will remain empty.

The moment the net was filled their eyes were opened: **“It is the Lord!” John 21:7**

Peter jumps out of the boat – fortunately they are close enough to land – and runs to Jesus! The rest of the disciples bring the boat and the fish net to shore and when they get there, did you notice what they saw...

“a charcoal fire in place, with fish laid out on it, and bread.” John 21:9

“A charcoal fire...” They say that fragrance is a tremendous memory inducer. The scent of a particular perfume. The smell of fresh cut grass. The aroma of baby powder. Fragrance can move your mind years into the past and connect with an event, a person, a memory. What Peter and Jesus talked about around that charcoal fire before the other disciples arrived we don't know. But after the rest of the disciples arrived, Jesus said to “them” (v.10) – notice that -- “Bring some of the fish you have just caught,” it was Peter who jumped to it and hauled that heavy net to shore. Could Jesus still use Peter?

This passage is full of all kinds of spiritual lessons, just like the net was full of all kinds of fish, but this morning I only want to highlight one lesson. Peter and the other disciples had spent all night fishing and had caught nothing. It wasn't because Peter was a bad fisherman. It wasn't because Peter had failed Jesus when Jesus needed him most. It was because Jesus wanted to remind Peter, and to remind you and me, that our success in reaching people for Christ doesn't depend upon our skill or upon our knowledge or even upon our spiritual togetherness. Jesus was telling Peter that the key to success in winning people to him was the same thing that it was on the very first day when Peter met Jesus...

Catching “fish” depends upon depending on Jesus

It depends upon us acknowledging that our nets are empty and that we need Jesus to fill them! Jesus said...

“Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing.” John 15:5

The answer to empty nets is not fishing harder, or fishing smarter or fishing longer ... the answer to empty nets is calling out to Jesus and asking him to use us to draw people to him. It isn't about getting a better technique or adopting a new program or getting our own act together. It's about depending on Jesus. Can you do that? Can you acknowledge your own emptiness? Can you be honest before the Lord and realize your total dependence upon him?

How do we express our dependence upon Jesus to reach people for him? Let me suggest at least one thing: **prayer**.

Mark Buchanan, pastor of New Life Community Church in Duncan, BC, learned that lesson one night at the Brooklyn Tabernacle in New York City. He wrote...

“The Tuesday night prayer meeting at Brooklyn Tabernacle felt like skydiving into a tornado, exhausting and exhilarating all at once. I'd read about the meeting in Pastor Jim Cymbala's book Fresh Wind, Fresh Fire, but nothing prepared me for the event itself: 3,500 God-hungry people storming heaven for two hours.

Afterward, my friend and I went out to dinner with the Cymbalas. In the course of the meal, Jim turned to me and said, “Mark, do you know what the number one sin of the church in America is?” I wasn't sure, and the question was rhetorical anyhow. “It's not the plague of internet pornography that is consuming our men. It's not that the divorce rate in the church is roughly the same as society at large.”

Jim named two or three other candidates for the worst sin, all of which he dismissed. “The number one sin of the church in America,” he said, “is that its pastors and leaders are not on their knees crying out to God, ‘Bring us the drug-addicted, bring us the prostitutes, bring us the destitute, bring us the gang leaders, bring us those with AIDS, bring us the people nobody else wants, whom only you can heal, and let us love them in your name until they are whole.’”

I had no response. I was undone. He had laid me bare, found me out, and exposed my fraudulence. I was the chief of sinners. I had never prayed, not once, for God to bring such people to my church. So I went home and repented. I stopped sinning. I began to cry out for “those nobody wants.”³

³ Mark Buchanan, “Messy, Costly, Dirty Ministry,” Leadershipjournal.net (5-15-09) | posted 6/29/2009
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Can God use failed fishermen like you and me to catch people for Christ? Yes, if we will throw ourselves on Jesus in prayer.

The second movement in the story of God's grace in Peter's life is one that I call...

Feed Sheep

Pulling that net ashore for Jesus had been an important step in Peter's healing, but there was more work to do.

¹⁵ When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?" He said to him, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." He said to him, "Feed my lambs." ¹⁶ He said to him a second time, "Simon, son of John, do you love me?" He said to him, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." He said to him, "Tend my sheep." ¹⁷ He said to him the third time, "Simon, son of John, do you love me?" Peter was grieved because he said to him the third time, "Do you love me?" and he said to him, "Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Feed my sheep.

Feed Sheep

Breakfast was finished, the charcoal fire was beginning to die, when Jesus turned to Peter and began the work that he had come north to perform.

"Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?" Jesus' question can be taken several ways but I think the thrust of the question is this: "Peter, do you love me more than these other disciples love me?" Earlier I asked you to take note of Peter's declaration of loyalty to Jesus. When Jesus had told Peter that he could not walk the road of the cross with him, Peter had declared: "I will lay down my life for you." (John 13:37) Matthew's Gospel adds an important angle on Peter's declaration. Matthew records Peter's words this way...

"Though they all fall away because of you, I will never fall away." Matthew 26:33

Peter had an exalted notion about himself. He thought he was more devoted to Jesus than the other disciples were. He saw himself as the head of the pack. He'd developed the notion that he was Jesus' "right-hand man," that he needed and that without him everything would fall. But at the moment of crisis, he fell ... and everything unfolded without him. Peter was entirely disposable when it came to Jesus' work. Jesus didn't need him to accomplish his salvation. Jesus

went to the cross alone ... Peter was not needed. Jesus rose again from the dead ... Peter wasn't there because Peter wasn't needed.

By the way, did you notice that there were fish on the charcoal fire when Peter came ashore? Jesus didn't "need" Peter's fish. In fact, Jesus didn't "need" Peter. And he doesn't need you or me, either. He doesn't need us like we need Him. His work will not fall if we fall. He graciously invites us to join Him in his work of drawing people to believe in him, but his work isn't dependent upon you or me.

I've sometimes heard it said, "Well, at least Peter was there with Jesus at his trial. He might have denied Jesus but at least he was there. Where were the others?" Good question. On the night that Jesus was arrested and brought to the high priest for his first trial, John tells us that...

"Simon Peter followed Jesus, and so did another disciple. Since that disciple was known to the high priest, he entered with Jesus into the court of the high priest, but Peter stood outside at the door. So the other disciple, who was known to the high priest, went out and spoke to the servant girl who kept watch at the door, and brought Peter in." John 18:15-16

There was "another disciple" with Jesus that night. Who was it? John's habit in his Gospel is to name other significant disciples but never to name himself. I think it was John. John was there with Jesus that night. Did he "fall away"? No. Did he deny Jesus? No.

There around the charcoal fire with that "other disciple" listening in Jesus asked Peter: "Do you really love me more than these other disciples love me?" **"Yes, Lord; you know that I love you."** But Jesus' purpose was to deflate Peter's self-exaltation, not encourage it. And twice more, to drive his point home, Jesus asks Peter "do you love me?" Peter's answers are limited to his relationship with Jesus. Gone is the comparison. Three times a humbled, chastened Peter reaffirms his love for Jesus standing before his fellow disciples. Peter had denied Jesus three times standing around a charcoal fire and on this beach in Galilee, Jesus asked Peter to affirm his love for him three times. And three times Jesus commissions him to care for those who believe in him: **"Feed my sheep."**

Can Jesus use pompous, self-important disciples who think they're indispensable to the work of the Gospel? By His grace, yes he can. But I can tell you that...

Jesus delights to use broken, humbled, failed disciples who love him to care for his people

Forget about comparing yourself with other disciples. Forget about your record of accomplishments and your list of failures. *Do you love Jesus?* Then "feed his sheep": teach a Bible class, lead a small group, mentor a young believer, take

meals to the sick, pray for someone who's struggling, financially support a missionary, do something to provide life and encouragement to those who believe in Jesus.

Last week I mentioned a sign above the exit door of a church that read: "You are now entering the mission field." We leave this place each week to "catch fish." This week I read about another sign hanging above the entrance to a different church. As people entered for worship in that place the sign above their heads read: "Servant's Entrance." Those who worship Jesus are his servants to feed and tend his sheep.

The third and final movement of God's grace in Peter's life that John records for us is one that I simply call ...

Follow Me

¹⁸ Truly, truly, I say to you, when you were young, you used to dress yourself and walk wherever you wanted, but when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and another will dress you and carry you where you do not want to go. ¹⁹ (This he said to show by what kind of death he was to glorify God.) And after saying this he said to him, "Follow me."

²⁰ Peter turned and saw the disciple whom Jesus loved following them, the one who also had leaned back against him during the supper and had said, "Lord, who is it that is going to betray you?" ²¹ When Peter saw him, he said to Jesus, "Lord, what about this man?" ²² Jesus said to him, "If it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you? You follow me!" ²³ So the saying spread abroad among the brothers that this disciple was not to die; yet Jesus did not say to him that he was not to die, but, "If it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you?"

Follow Me

Remember, Jesus had told Peter: **'Where I am going you cannot follow me now, but you will follow afterward.'** (John 13:36) Jesus had to go to the cross alone, but he told Peter that he would have his own cross to bear. The expression, "you will stretch out your hands" has been taken down through the centuries as a reference to Peter's death by crucifixion. We don't know exactly how Peter died but it seems that Peter was eventually given the opportunity to lay down his life for Jesus and to bring glory to God in it.

Jesus' prophecy of Peter's death was one that clearly involved hardship. Peter's road ahead was not going to be pleasant, but it was the one that the Lord had decreed for him. Peter's tendency to compare himself with others again reared its head. Peter looks at John, standing nearby, and asks Jesus: "What about him?" "That," Jesus answers, "is none of your business."

“You follow me!” John 21:22

We’re always tempted to look sideways, wondering why this person’s road seems easier than ours, or harder. Jesus says, “Keep your eyes on me!” As Bible scholar D.A. Carson writes, this tendency to look sideways and compare the path of one disciple with another...

... is so very human, but ... so very wrong. The personal relationship between the Lord and individual Christians, including issues like the future form and sphere of their service, the degree of their obedience, or the quality of their contribution, is ‘holy ground’, sacred to the individuals concerned. ... The ministries of Peter and John would be different. Peter would be the shepherd, John the seer; Peter the preacher, John the penman; Peter the foundational witness, John the faithful writer; Peter would die in the agony and passion of martyrdom, John would live on to great age and pass away in quiet serenity.

Peter is faced here, as we all are, with the fact of partnership in following Jesus. There are many others on the road with us, as truly Christ’s, as surely commissioned, as deeply loved, as greatly valued. Their calling and gifts may be different; their instincts, and even their convictions in certain matters, may not coincide with our own; but we can thank God for them and at times be inspired and challenged by their example. In the end, however, our focus must remain on Jesus himself. ‘Keep following me.’ Jesus alone is our Master; to him we belong, to him we must give account; we are to live ‘looking unto Jesus’ (Heb. 12:2, av).⁴

Is my path in following Jesus the same as yours? That’s up to the Lord to decide. We follow Him. Is your path easier or harder than mine? That’s up to the Lord. We follow him. Jesus said...

“Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men.” Matthew 4:19

“If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.” Mark 8:34

“Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head ... Follow me.” Luke 9:58-59

“I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.” John 8:12

⁴ Carson, D. A. (1991). *The Gospel according to John* (682). Leicester, England; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Inter-Varsity Press; W.B. Eerdmans.

**“My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me.” John
10:27**

“If anyone serves me, he must follow me” John 12:26

“You follow me!” John 21:22

“Catch Fish, Feed Sheep & Follow Me. That is your mission until I return!”

And to him be the glory. Amen.

- **Invitation to Prayer Ministry**
- **Final Song:** O for A Thousand Tongues to Sing (#21)
- **Benediction**