

Vs. 18-19a – With Peter's love confirmed and his position reestablished, the Lord gives insight into the lead apostle's future. Jesus did indeed know Peter's heart. But he also knows where that love will lead him. Jesus says, "Verily, verily, I say unto thee, When thou wast young, thou girdedst thyself, and walkedst whither thou wouldest: but when thou shalt be old, thou shalt stretch forth thy hands, and another shall gird thee, and carry thee whither thou wouldest not." The lead apostle finally knows what Jesus meant when he said, "Whither I go, thou canst not follow me now; but thou shalt follow me afterwards" (13:36).¹ In ancient times, "stretch forth thy hands" referred to crucifixion.² To ensure his readers do not miss this point, John interrupts the conversation with a parenthetical statement: "This spake he, signifying by what death he should glorify God" (cf. 12:33). That the Beloved Apostle says the Lead Apostle's death would "glorify God" not only characterizes martyrdom as an honorable thing, in the same vein as Christ's own crucifixion (cf. 12:27-28; 13:31-32; 17:1), but it also confirms Jesus' prediction. Peter died sometime during the reign of Nero (54-68 AD).³ It is difficult to say if, as the legend goes, he was crucified upside down. This claim did not arise until the late second century in the "Acts of Peter," which is "one of the five ancient apocryphal Acts that relate the missionary activities of the apostles beyond the canonical account."⁴ What is undeniable, at least from a Scriptural (cf. 2 Pet. 1:14) and a historical standpoint, is that Peter died for his faith.⁵ John, writing after 70AD, wants his readers to understand that the Lord predicted Peter's death roughly *three decades* before it occurred. This is yet another awe-inspiring example of Jesus' divine foreknowledge, a testament to his omniscience and the depth of his understanding.

Setting aside such concerns for a moment, it's crucial not to overlook the comparison between Peter's denial and his eventual martyrdom. The same man who once distanced himself from Christ died in the *same* manner as Christ. As a young man, Peter had boldly declared his willingness to follow Jesus to the cross (cf. 13:37) but faltered, only to fulfill that promise as an older man. In Peter's story, a fearful man becomes a courageous martyr.

¹ Köstenberger (2004), p. 598.

² Carson (1991), p. 679; Keener (2003), 2:1237.

³ Köstenberger (2004), p. 599.

⁴ Callon, Callie, "Acts of Peter," July 28, 2021, *Oxford Bibliographies*, <https://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/display/document/obo-9780195393361/obo-9780195393361-0285.xml>, [accessed, April 22, 2025].

⁵ In addition to John's testimony here, three others confirm Peter's martyrdom: Clement of Rome (30-100 AD), Tertullian (155-220 AD), and Eusebius (260-340 AD).

Vs. 19b – Jesus tells Peter, “Follow me.”⁶ This command functions in two ways: literally and figuratively. As the following verses show, the setting moves from the “charcoal fire” (vs. 9) to what seems to be a stroll alongside the Sea of Galilee. So, when the Lord said, “Follow me,” he literally told Peter to “take a walk with me.”

But it is naïve to think that the phrase “follow me” is not pregnant with meaning. That phrase is synonymous with the call to discipleship (cf. 1:43; 10:27; 12:26; 13:36; Matt. 4:19; 8:22; 9:9; 10:38; 19:21; etc.). Jesus just told Peter he’d die via crucifixion. The Lead Apostle would eventually pick up his own cross and *follow* in Jesus’ footsteps (cf. Matt. 16:24).⁷ To suddenly know the nature of one’s death is a heavy load for the mind to bear; it would need a *focal point* to keep it from diverting away from the path in front of it. Hence, Jesus tells Peter *to follow him*. The Lord does not want the apostle to fixate on the end of his life; no, he wants him to focus on the One who will be waiting for him in the afterlife. After all, just as Christ died and rose again, so too will Peter. Death was not the end for the Son of God, and neither will it be for any follower of God.

As John pointed out (vs. 19), Peter’s death *glorified* God. *It is a matter of great honor to endure shame for the sake of Christ’s name* (cf. Ac. 5:41). Moreover, the rewards that awaited Peter in heaven far surpassed any suffering he experienced on earth. To share in Christ’s suffering guarantees a share in Christ’s glory (cf. Rom. 8:17-18). All who bear a cross will wear a crown (cf. Matt. 16:24-26; 2 Cor. 4:16-18; Heb. 12:2). As Joni Eareckson Tada so aptly put it,

“The best we can hope for in this life is a knothole peek at the shining realities ahead. Yet a glimpse is enough. It’s enough to convince our hearts that whatever sufferings and sorrows currently assail us aren’t worthy of comparison to that which waits over the horizon.”

Following Christ may lead to ridicule, suffering, and even death. But what is this life? It is a vapor. Ultimately, all pain is temporary, while the Lord’s peace is eternal (cf. 14:27). Better to follow a *hard* path that leads to *life* than an *easy* one that leads to *death* (cf. Matt. 7:13-14; 10:28).

Vs. 20-21 – While Peter and Jesus were walking, someone was closely “following” them. Peter, “turning about,” sees that it is John, aka “the disciple whom Jesus loved;” this is the same disciple who “also leaned on [Jesus’] breast at supper, and said, Lord, which is he that betrayeth thee?” It is unclear why John needed to reference that particular instance here. Perhaps he

⁶ “Follow” is a second-person singular verb. Jesus was directly addressing Peter.

⁷ Köstenberger (2004), p. 599, “The rest of Peter’s life must be lived in the shadow of the cross, just as Jesus’ was.”

sought to further cement his credentials as one who was present during the events of Jesus' life and listened intently. As was the case with the conversation between Judas and Jesus in the Upper Room (cf. 13:22-27), so it was here with the discussion between Peter and Jesus. Whenever something important is said, John is close by to hear it (cf. 1:37; 18:5; 19:26).⁸ Like a stenographer, the Beloved Apostle pays close attention to key exchanges. His account emphasizes dialogue more than the Synoptics, which, in their defense, cover far more content. Rather than bombarding his readers with action set pieces, John would rather give a handful of fully developed interactions.

Looking at John, Peter asks Jesus, "Lord, and what shall this man do?" The phrase "this man" has been used in a pejorative sense throughout John (cf. 6:52; 7:15, 27; 9:16, 24; 11:37, 47; 18:29, 40; 19:12). But it has also been used positively (cf. 7:31, 46; 9:33; 10:41) and in more neutral situations (cf. 9:2-3; 18:29). To me, the third option seems best.⁹ Even given the competitive nature between the apostles (*see notes* 20:3-5; cf. Mar. 10:37; Lu. 9:46; 22:24), it is unlikely that Peter, who shared a close bond with John (*see notes* 13:24), would disparage his fellow apostle. This is especially true in the light of the fact that, unlike John, he had just been restored from a rather humiliating mistake. It is better to understand Peter as saying, "What about him?" The bond shared between Jesus and John was plain for all to see. If he, the *Lead* Apostle, was destined for crucifixion, what was the fate of the *Beloved* Apostle? The question is innocent enough; it is more out of curiosity than anything else.

Vs. 22 – "Jesus saith unto him, If I will that he tarry till I come, what is that to thee? follow thou me." In Greek, "you" is in the emphatic position, being placed in the front of the command: "You must follow me."¹⁰ If the Lord wanted to, he could keep John alive until he returned. But what does that have to do with Peter? In essence, the Lord said to Peter, "John's fate is none of your business." Peter's primary objective was following Jesus. That, more than anything else, was the imperative.

An old saying goes, "Comparison is the thief of joy." It is problematic when individuals are constantly comparing themselves to others. On the one hand, if the person being assessed is, in some way, worse, the Christian struggles with *vanity*. On the other hand, if the person being evaluated is, in some way, better, the Christian struggles with *inadequacy*. Either way, playing the comparison game results in a spiritual deficiency. Therefore, good or bad, we mustn't be

⁸ Köstenberger (2004), p. 601, playing off Schlatter (1948: 372-73), refers to John the Beloved as "the silent listener."

⁹ Keener (2003), 2:1238, "Peter's question about the beloved disciple reflects some continuing (albeit not hostile) competition between the two figures."

¹⁰ Carson (1991), p. 681.

hasty to draw conclusions or make assumptions about anyone (cf. 1 Cor. 4:1-5). Peter was at risk of falling into the trap of comparing himself to John. And the only cure was for him to "follow" Jesus. He had to pull his attention away from everything and everyone else and fix his gaze on the Lord (cf. Heb. 12:1-2). After all, feelings of inadequacy and vanity evaporate only when comparing oneself to Jesus. No believer can boast in themselves; all they can do is boast in what Christ has done and is doing for them and through them (cf. Eph. 2:8-10; Phil. 2:13). And no Christian can disparage themselves, for, in God's eyes, their value is immense (cf. Matt. 10:31; 1 Jn. 3:1)

Vs. 23 – John explains that while Jesus' words corrected a *misguided* Peter, they were, ultimately, *misunderstood* by the broader faith community. He says, "Then went this saying abroad among the brethren, that that disciple should not die: yet Jesus said not unto him, He shall not die; but, If I will that he tarry till I come, what is that to thee?" It's remarkable that just like the apostles (cf. 4:31-34; 14:5; 20:9), "the brethren," aka believers, had trouble understanding Jesus' words, perhaps interpreting them too literally. They equated "If I will that [John] tarry till I come" with John would "not die." This means they erroneously assumed that either Jesus would return in John's lifetime or that John would live forever. John sought to set the record straight. He *twice* relays Jesus' words verbatim to show that they were *hypothetical*, not *prophetical*.

According to church history, John died sometime during the reign of Roman Emperor Trajan (c. 98-117 AD).¹¹ If the date of the crucifixion is 33 AD, John lived another sixty-ish years after the ascension, and he may even have seen the turn of the century. The *Mishnah*, a first-century literary work that compiled the oral traditions of Jewish law, stipulates that the average age of a Rabbi's disciples would've been no younger than 15.¹² If the timing of John's call to discipleship was similar, this means he would've been in his late teens when Christ died, and he would've been in his early eighties when he eventually passed away. And while the average life expectancy was low in the first century, about 30 years of age, many individuals lived long lives.

¹¹ Elowsky, Joel C., *John 11-21*, Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, Volume IVb, (Downers Grove, IL; InterVarsity Press, 2007), p. 395, quotes Theodore of Mopsuestia (c. 350-428), as saying that John lived "seventy-three years after the ascension of the Lord to the time of Trajan, and died after all the other apostles in peace and serenity by natural death." Köstenberger (2004), p. 602, states that Jerome (c. 347-420) claims John "died sixty-eight years after the passion of the Lord."

¹² Pirkei Avot 5:21, "[Judah ben Tema] said: At five years of age the study of Scripture; At ten the study of Mishnah; At thirteen subject to the commandments; At fifteen the study of Talmud; At eighteen the bridal canopy; At twenty for pursuit [of livelihood]; At thirty the peak of strength; At forty wisdom; At fifty able to give counsel; At sixty old age; At seventy fullness of years; At eighty the age of "strength"; At ninety a bent body; At one hundred, as good as dead and gone completely out of the world."

Augustus died at 75, while Tiberius passed away at 77. So, it is not irrational to suppose that John lived just as long, even if he was older than most.

Regardless, it is intriguing that, at the end of his account, John sought to dispel the rumor that he'd live forever. A skeptic might suppose this passage was added after John's death to save face. It would be less than flattering for Christianity if John died when Jesus said he wouldn't. But such a conclusion is mere conjecture. It is just as likely that John wanted to correct the confusion himself, especially when the assertion that he wouldn't die completely misunderstands and misrepresents Jesus' *actual* words.

Misquoting Scripture was as much of a problem back then as today. For instance, much harm has been done by those who think, because of a misunderstanding of 1 Cor. 10:13, that God will not give them more than they can handle. Try to say that to Job when he lost everything or to Joseph when he was sold into slavery by his brothers. God will often take us beyond our limits so that we better rely upon his strength and not our own (cf. 2 Cor. 12:1-10). In the same vein, countless people have become disillusioned because they've ignored the original audience of Jer. 29:11 and applied that verse to themselves. They mistakenly assume that God has only pleasant things in store for his followers in this life, when, in reality, it's the exact opposite (cf. 16:33; 2 Tim. 3:12). Or, lastly, take Phil. 4:13. Some incorrectly use this verse as something like a motto for unbridled expansion. They think that, by claiming it as their "life verse," they'll accomplish bigger and better things. However, such an application completely ignores the context of Philippians. Paul called Christians to supernatural contentment in every scenario, particularly in situations that *weren't* going their way. His point was that, in "all things," a Christian could be satisfied in Christ because it is Christ who "strengthens" the Christian.

As you can see, beliefs unsupported by Scripture are stumbling blocks. Just as John did about his lifespan, we must set the record straight regarding the Scriptures. Otherwise, well-meaning Christians will propagate misinformation, damaging the church. Or, even worse, bad actors, con artists, and false teachers will prey on the sheep of God, leading them astray with words that have a ring of truth but utterly devoid of it.

VIDEO DESCRIPTION

Deep Dive: The Gospel of John | Week 103 | John 21:18-23

SPEAKER: Ben Hyrne, Pastor

In tonight's passage, Peter will learn that to love Christ is to live in the shadow of the cross; that is to say, it is to live under a death sentence. After all, Jesus himself said, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me" (Matt. 16:24). And while, thankfully, the vast majority of Christians haven't been crucified, some have; namely, Peter. According to church history, he was executed during the reign of Nero, sometime between 54-68 AD. That alone is significant. But even more remarkable is that, as tonight's passage will show, the Lead Apostle knew, long before it happened, that he was headed for a cross.

Pastor's manuscript can be found here:

Grace Pointe Baptist Church

12029 Eastern Ave.

Baltimore, MD 21220

Contact: info@GracePointeLife.com

Website: <https://www.gracepointelife.com>

Give: <https://www.gracepointelife.com/give/>

Podcast Details:

Season 1 | 103