

The Call of Discipleship

TEXT: Jn 21:18-25

PHBF 11.19.17

Scr. Reading: John 21:18-25

BELIEVE! The Gospel of John

I've always been a bit fascinated by the American Presidency. I suppose my interest could be traced back to a coffee table book in our home when I was in grade school. I'd spend hours looking at the large color portraits of each President and reading their biographical sketches—hours that proved valuable one day in middle school, when our teacher offered extra credit on a social studies quiz with the outlandish challenge to name the man in “this picture,” and I easily identified Martin Van Buren by his outlandish facial hair.

I'm not sure what about the Presidency captured my imagination. I suspect it was the sheer greatness of their lives—men like Washington, Adams, Lincoln, Roosevelt, Eisenhower, and others. Men whose achievements and abilities are American legend. Our country truly has been led by some great men. And even our most middling Presidents are significant enough figures that their memory should be preserved, honored, and studied.

That's the reason for the Presidential Libraries Act—to preserve and provide access to the documents, personal memorabilia, and important historical artifacts from each President since Hoover (1930s). Today, the National Archives and Records Administration oversees 15 Presidential libraries, each of which is a rich repository of personal information about each President, his administration, and the times in which he lived. The individual libraries range in size from 47,000 to 135,000 square feet, and their total holdings include over 270,000 cubic feet of material. To help you appreciate that volume, let's assume your house is an above-average 2700 square feet with 10' ceilings throughout. The holdings in our Presidential Libraries would fill every inch of your house from floor to ceiling... 10 times over. That's a lot of stuff, and it testifies to the importance and greatness of these men and the work they did.

So... what does this have to do with the Gospel of John? Look at 21:25:

21:25 *Now there are also many other things that Jesus did. Were every one of them to be written, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written.*

John suggests that, **if all Jesus' works were fully documented, the world**

itself would be an inadequate library, such is the greatness and significance of this Man. John's gospel ends where it began—striving to impress upon his readers the identity and worth of Jesus of Nazareth. Remember how he started?

1:1-5 *In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ² He was in the beginning with God. ³ All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made. ⁴ In him was life, and the life was the light of men. ⁵ The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.*

Before John tells us anything about Jesus' life, he wants us to know who He is—namely, the Preexistent, Divine, Creating, Living, Life-giving, Illuminating, Invincible Word. And, with fewer specifics but the same intent, so he ends. It's all about Jesus.

This theme—the worth and greatness of Jesus of Nazareth—must be central in our minds as we examine this final story in John. The point of the story is obvious: **following Jesus requires complete and utter surrender.** Jesus says to Peter: “No matter what it costs, no matter what happens to anyone else, you follow me.” It seems shocking and severe... until you remember who this Jesus is. **By the sheer force of His personal authority, Jesus says:** “Your life? Mine. Your vocation? Mine. Your destiny? Mine. Follow me.” And every one of His true disciples replies, “Yep. Done.”

For John, the call of discipleship isn't an ad-on to the normal Christian life. This kind of radical surrender isn't reserved for super-saints. John writes (20:30-31) that the whole purpose of this book is to compel you to believe; but then he ends the book, not with a story of radical belief (Thomas), but with a story of radical surrender (Peter). Why? Because discipleship is part and parcel of what it means to believe. **John can't tell you what it means to believe without telling you what it means to follow.** Here's what we'll see:

- True disciples are not deterred by the cost.
- True disciples are driven by God's glory.
- True disciples are not distracted by others.

True disciples are not deterred by the cost.

We pick up the story right in the middle of Jesus' conversation with Peter. We looked last week at how carefully the Savior led his fallen friend to repentance, forgave him, and restored him to leadership. Three times, Jesus asked: "Do you love me?" Peter replied, "Yes, I love you." Jesus responded: "Feed my sheep."

On the third exchange (v17), Jesus continues right on into this:

vv18-19 *"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."*

Taken by itself, verse 18 might appear to be describing the normal decline we all experience with old age. But in verse 19, the Holy Spirit interprets Jesus' words for us: "Jesus said this to show by what kind of death Peter would die." For someone in Peter's culture, Jesus' meaning would have been abundantly clear.

There's a wordplay in Jesus' words that isn't very clear in English. The word "dress," used 2x in v18 ("dress yourself... dress you"), is more literally "gird," which means "to encircle with a belt" or "bind up." It could convey either idea: "get dressed up" or "get tied up." In this case, both are in view, leaving us with something like this in plain English: "When you were young, you used to dress yourself up, but when you are old, someone else will tie you up." (cf. HCSB)

But just in case Peter missed the point of the wordplay, Jesus uses two other terms that would have been unmistakable. In this culture, there were two common euphemisms for crucifixion: to be "stretched out" and to be "lifted up." Jesus uses both: "you will stretch out your hands" and "another will [lift you up and] carry you." There's no way Peter could have missed the point. **Jesus is predicting Peter will be crucified.**

Notice what happens next in this conversation (v19b): "After saying this Jesus said to Peter, 'Follow me.'" Suddenly, Jesus' earlier words to Peter in the Upper Room make complete sense:

13:36 *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."*

Jesus' prediction of Peter's death by crucifixion makes His call for Peter to "Follow me" take on a very literal meaning. He's calling Peter to follow Him literally to the death—the very death He Himself had just suffered days earlier. The shadow of a cross hung over the rest of Peter's life, just as the cross had hung over the Savior's life.

The night Peter denied knowing Jesus, he imagined that his association with Jesus might cause him to experience the same fate. Now, without any apology, Jesus predicts exactly that. How did Peter do this time?

History indicates that Peter was martyred sometime in the mid-60s under the reign of Nero—more than 30 years distant from Jesus' prediction. That gave Peter a long time to contemplate his death. Tradition tells us that, when the moment finally came for Peter to spread his hands and be tied and lifted up by another, he requested to be crucified upside down because he didn't feel worthy to die in the same manner as His Lord.

Peter lived the rest of his life in the shadow of the cross. Why? Because **Jesus of Nazareth called him to be a disciple, and true disciples are not deterred by the cost**. Friends, every Christian must live his/her life the same way. I don't just mean "completely surrendered and obedient to Jesus." I mean live life overshadowed by the cross:

Luke 9:23 *And Jesus said to all, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me."*

To be a Christian means your life is not your own. It is laid down, stretched out, given up. **Your daily choices must look like the cross—death to self, surrender to Jesus**. This is the normal Christian life. If you claim to be a follower of Jesus, you no longer live to please yourself. You live to please Him. Practically, it means two things:

- 1) Give yourself up in love for God.
- 2) Lay your life down in love for others.

Notice what's missing in those two? Any option to please yourself. **If you give yourself to these two great commandments, yours will be a cruciform life**. Jesus may not call you to be crucified for Him like Peter, but He does call you to a life of love. And a life of love is hard. In fact, it often feels like death—death to my time, my dreams, my comfort, my praise, my leisure, my money, my advancement, my everything. And that, friends, is the normal Christian life. The Christian life is a life of

chosen sacrifice, willful deliberate loss, out of love for God and love for others. When Jesus says “Follow me,” we say “Okay. With your help, I will.” Because we know true disciples follow no matter what the cost.

True disciples are driven by God’s glory

Did you notice the particular way the Holy Spirit ended that statement about Peter’s death in verse 19?

v19 *(This he said to show by what kind of death he was to glorify God.)*

That little clause at the end is SO important. It gives purpose to this whole event. **Peter isn’t just going to die by crucifixion; he’s going to glorify God by crucifixion.**

This “glory” theme has been the point of the whole story, remember? Way back in the intro, John wrote:

1:14 *The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.*

And later, just before His death, Jesus prayed:

17:1 *"Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son that the Son may glorify you..."*

Jesus’ life glorified God. His death glorified God. And **now He invites Peter to take his place in this grand purpose—to live and die to highlight the worth and majesty of God.**

Friends, ever wonder what your life is all about? THIS! You are part of a larger story God is telling to highlight His own worth and draw attention to His own greatness.

One of the quickest ways to make sense of your life is to come to terms with this. Yes, it takes surrender. It takes humility. It might even feel like death. But it’s the only option that makes sense. Otherwise, as I’ve said before, you’re just Hamlet arguing with Shakespeare about how to write your part in the play.

Does your life feel out of kilter, uncertain, pointless? Don’t you want to know what it all means and why you are here? Here is something truly worth living for—to live in such a way that everyone around you says,

“Wow, what a God!”

We all get our identity from some story—i.e., a narrative framework about why we’re here, where we’re going, what’s the point. Everyone longs to be connected to true greatness. Well, here’s a story that connects you to a Person bigger than anyone else! This story says, “It’s not all about you. It’s about God.”

The purpose of your life—and death—is to bring glory to God. Not to enjoy yourself or be happy. But to make God look great. Wonderfully, when we get this right, our own happiness comes in along behind. It’s exactly as Jesus said:

Luke 9:23-24 *"If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. ²⁴ For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it.*

Want to find your life? Lose it for Him. It’s what Christianity is all about. True disciples are driven by God’s glory.

True disciples are not distracted by anyone else.

vv20-21 *Peter turned and saw the disciple whom Jesus loved following them, the one who had been reclining at table close to him 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?"*

Immediately after Jesus says “Follow me,” Peter turns away and looks at John. Jesus has just told him he’s going to die as a martyr. He wants to know: “Jesus, what will it cost John to follow you?” It seems like a reasonable question to us, but Jesus doesn’t see it that way at all:

vv22-23 *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?"*

Jesus feels zero need to explain or justify to Peter His plans for John. Why not? Jesus’ last words in v22 give the answer: “You follow me!” Peter shouldn’t be asking about John, because he shouldn’t be thinking about John. How are you supposed to follow Jesus if your eyes are on

someone else?

What it means to follow Jesus is to keep your eyes fully and exclusively on Him. The only thing that matters for you is what Jesus asks of you. That's it. If He says, "Feed my sheep," you become a shepherd. If he says "Here's how you will die," you become a martyr. ***In Christian discipleship, what matters is not WHAT He calls you to do; it's WHO calls you to do it:*** "Jesus said it. That settles it."

John himself actually hints at the answer to Peter's question:

vv24-25 *This is the disciple who is bearing witness about these things, and who has written these things, and we know that his testimony is true.* ²⁵ *Now there are also many other things that Jesus did. Were every one of them to be written, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written.*

John is called to a long life and a late writing ministry. Peter is called to pastoral ministry and martyrdom. Both callings are strategic and important at this moment in Jesus' kingdom. And *that*, above all, is the main point—they are both servants in a kingdom that belongs to Jesus, not them. Jesus essentially says to Peter: "John's future is none of your business; it is mine. I will ordain his future, just as I've ordained yours. Don't worry about him. You have one concern and one alone: Follow me."

Isn't this a wonderful warning from Jesus? It's so easy to become distracted from our own obedience to Jesus by comparing ourselves with others: "Why do I have to carry this burden? Why couldn't I have her life?" It can be so draining to compare, to measure, to spend our energy monitoring others instead of worshiping Jesus. Oh, how freeing it is to hear Jesus say, "What is that to you? You follow me." **True disciples are not distracted by anyone else.**

There's a wonderful illustration of this toward the end of C. S. Lewis's story *The Horse and His Boy*. Shasta is traveling alone on horseback through a thick wood at night, when he senses the presence of something else moving along beside him. During his ride, the boy has been reflecting on all the bad things that have happened to him in his life, and he's feeling quite sorry for himself. But then the hidden figure,

whom Lewis calls the "Large Voice" speaks:

"Tell me your sorrows." Shasta told how he had never known his real father or mother and had been brought up sternly by the fisherman. And then he told the story of his escape and how he and his friend Aravis were chased by lions and forced to swim for their lives; and of all their dangers in Tashbaan and about his night among the tombs and how the beasts howled at him out of the desert. And he told about the heat and thirst of their desert journey and how they were almost at their goal when another lion chased them and wounded Aravis. And also, how very long it was since had had anything to eat.

"I do not call you unfortunate," said the Large Voice.

"Don't you think it was bad luck to meet so many lions?" said Shasta.

"There was only one lion." said the Voice.

"How do you know?"

"I was the lion." And as Shasta gaped with open mouth and said nothing, the Voice continued. "I was the lion who forced you to join with Aravis. I was the cat who comforted you among the tombs. I was the lion who drove the jackals from you as you slept. I was the lion who gave the horses the new strength of fear for the last mile so that you should reach the king in time. And I was the lion you do not remember who pushed the boat in which you lay, a child near death, so that it came to shore where a man sat, wakeful at midnight, to receive you."

"Then it was you who wounded Aravis?"

"It was I."

"But what for?"

"Child," said the Voice, "I am telling you your story, not hers. I tell no one any story but his own."

The mist was turning from black to grey and from grey to white. This must have begun to happen some time ago, but while he had been talking to the Thing he had not been noticing anything else. Now, the whiteness around him became a shining whiteness; his eyes began to blink. He turned and saw, pacing beside him, taller than a horse, a Lion. It was from the lion that the light came. No one ever saw anything more terrible or more beautiful. After one glance at the Lion's face he slipped out of the saddle and fell at its feet.

That's discipleship—content to hear your own story, no one else's. Willing to pay any price. All because you're completely captivated by the glory of the King, who has said to you: "Follow me."

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