The Word Made Flesh · A Study in John

Where It All Began

Back to the Beat, Restored at the Fire, Called to Follow

JOHN 21

Recap

Today is the day. Today we finish our series in the Gospel of John, The Word Made Flesh. My prayer through this last year has been that the Word would truly feel as though it has put on flesh for you, that you have found more substance in it than ever before. We come now to chapter 21.

Last week we walked through chapter 20, the chapter of the Resurrection, when Jesus defeated hell and the grave and proved Himself to be everything He said He was. He found the disciples in hiding, afraid of being their lives to the Jewish leaders, and in that moment of fear, confusion, and disillusionment, Jesus showed up right in the middle of it. He appeared to them in bodily form and did three notable things. He calmed their fear by bringing peace when they needed it most. He commissioned them to go and proclaim forgiveness to the lost, saying, "As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you." And He breathed on them so that they received the Holy Spirit, the very Life of God, the One He had spent so much of John 14, 15, 16, and 17 preparing them for.

Thomas, who had not been there for that moment, had his doubts that it really happened. I am unsure whether he did not believe that Jesus had risen, or simply did not believe his friends' testimony. Either way, Jesus appeared to him in bodily form and showed him the holes in His hands, and at that, Thomas believed. (Open your Bibles to John 21.)

The Glory of Everyday Life

> JOHN 21:1-3
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> *After this Jesus revealed himself again to the disciples by the Sea of Tiberias, and he revealed himself in this way. Simon Peter, Thomas (called the Twin), Nathanael of Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two others of his disciples were together. 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.*
>
> ENGLISH STANDARD VERSION

This is an insightful moment. Jesus had just commissioned these men personally. He had just given them the Holy Spirit and sent them into the world to preach. What do you do in a moment like that? I think I go start a church, start a ministry, go make it happen. Not these men. They simply go on with life. They stop hiding and start living. Imagine the Lord showing up to you like this, telling you He has a plan for you, that you are going to do amazing things for Him, filling you with power and peace and courage, and you respond, "Great, I'm going fishing."

It is almost as if they assumed that the plan, the power, and the commission were going to play themselves out in the middle of ordinary life. Peter goes back to fishing, because that was his work before Jesus called him. And this is how it happens. This is primarily how the gospel spreads by Christians going to work, putting one foot in front of the other, and making a difference in their world. It is simply living life.

The church is often plagued by sacred-versus-secular thinking, the idea that this thing is sacred and that thing is secular, and we do it constantly with our jobs. You work in the marketplace, so that is secular; you work in ministry, so that is sacred. It is absolute garbage. For the Christian, all we do is sacred, because everything we do is an act of worship and obedience to the Lord. Peter goes back to what he knows and takes up the nets again, and it is just as sacred as the three years he spent walking with Jesus, because both are done for the glory of God.

Peter and the Sea

> JOHN 21:4-8
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> *Just as day was breaking, Jesus stood on the shore; yet the disciples did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to them, "Children, do you have any fish?" They answered him, "No." 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. Then 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 coat (garment, for he was stripped for work,) and threw himself into the sea. 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.*
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> ENGLISH STANDARD VERSION

I am really tempted to make a point here. I am tempted to say this is why you need to hear from the Lord about what to do, how to do it, and when to do it. I am tempted to preach that if you work in the flesh, in your own strength, you will catch nothing all night, but if you work under the clear direction of heaven's voice, you will land the catch of a lifetime. But that is not what the text is saying, and it is not what John is communicating. He includes this detail for a very specific reason, and it will make sense by the end of the sermon.

Notice instead something about Peter. His devotion and passion for Jesus are on full display once again. The moment he realizes it is the Lord, he does not wait for the boat. He throws himself into the water and starts swimming. The last time Peter climbed out of a boat, he was trying to walk on water, and there was a measure of boldness and confidence in it, a desire to do something extraordinary. This time is different. Peter is not trying to prove anything. He is not trying to impress anyone. He is not trying to walk on water. He just wants to get to Jesus, so he swims a hundred yards, fully clothed, to reach Him.

John goes out of his way in this book to highlight Peter's failures, far more than Matthew, Mark, and Luke do. But that is only because John wants us to see who Peter really is a man who falls often, yet who, when push comes to shove, runs after Jesus with all his heart. I do not want to encourage you to fail. But I do want to comfort you and reassure you in it. When you fail, when you fall short, run to Jesus. Be like Peter.

When you fail, when you fall short, run to Jesus.

The Fire and the Breakfast

> JOHN 21:9-14
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> *When they got out on land, they saw a burning fire in place, with fish laid out on it, and bread. Jesus said to them, "Bring some of the fish that you have just caught." 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. Jesus said to them, "Come and have breakfast." None none of the disciples dared ask him, "Who are you?" They knew it was the Lord. Jesus came and took the bread and gave it to them, and so with the fish. This was now the third time that Jesus was revealed to the disciples after he was raised from the dead.*
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> ENGLISH STANDARD VERSION

We covered part of this when we went through chapter 18, but for those who were not here, it is an important element of the story. Jesus builds a charcoal fire. In Greek the word is anthrakia, and it appears only twice in the New Testament, both times in the Gospel of John. The only other place it is mentioned is the night Peter denied Jesus. He denied over knowing Him, in chapter 18, around an anthrakia. Jesus is being deliberate here. He is taking Peter back to the night of his greatest failure. Peter had denied Jesus three times around a charcoal fire just days earlier, so it is only fitting that Jesus would restore him around a charcoal fire.

I want to point out something else. Jesus says, "Come and have breakfast." Remember that John was written after the other three Gospels, to give a side of the story he felt had been missed, and he deliberately ends his Gospel with Jesus having breakfast with His friends. Mark and Luke end their accounts with Jesus ascending into heaven. Matthew ends with the Great Commission, the most important instructions ever given to the Christians of the world. John ends his with a breakfast. There was something so meaning, so important about this moment, that John felt he had to include it.

I think it is because of what it allows to happen here, where Peter is restored. I think John felt it was vital that people remember the heart of the gospel, that no matter how badly you mess up, second chances are found in Jesus. There is no sin His cannot redeem, if they will simply come to Him. The most important thing in John was that you would remember that Jesus forgives sins and redeems lives.

There is no one He cannot redeem, if they will simply come to Him.

Restoration and the New Commandment

> JOHN 21:15-17
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> *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." 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." 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."*
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> ENGLISH STANDARD VERSION

This is the moment. Peter denied Him three times around the charcoal fire, and now he confesses his love for Jesus three times around the charcoal fire. Narratively, it feels as though Jesus is undoing the denials. What we have to notice is the connection Jesus makes between our love for Him and our love for His people. He is undergirding the New Commandment yet again. Do you love me? Then you are going to have to love my people. I am leaving, and if you love me, you will care for them in my stead. You will love them the way I do. You will feed them, nourish them, serve them, train them, and protect them.

You cannot claim to love me and refuse to care for my people. This is not only a pastoral call, it is a Christian call. We are all to do this.

> A MOMENT TO DO SOMETHING
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> Think back to your most recent failure. When it happened, did you run toward Jesus, or away from Him?
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> Bring your a heartfelt prayer back to reach the One he had denied. The charcoal fire that marked the worst sight of his life became the very place of his restoration. Jesus does not mend the scene of your failure. He builds a fire there, and He calls you to breakfast.

Ending Where It All Began

> JOHN 21:18-19
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> *"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." (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."*
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> ENGLISH STANDARD VERSION

This is an incredible moment. Peter will never deny Jesus again. But Jesus is warning him that it is going to cost him. Peter will ultimately die because he refuses to renounce his faith. This book was almost certainly written after Peter's death, and John wants us to understand that Peter said yes on the front end, knowing full well what it would cost him in the end. Peter was martyred. The Romans were going to crucify him, but history tells us he begged to be crucified upside down, because he did not consider himself worthy to die in the same manner as his Lord. And in his death, he glorified God.

In your death, you too will glorify God. Every day that you die to yourself, you are glorifying God. When you hold your tongue, when you do what is right, when you choose Jesus and His desires over your own, you are glorifying God.

Then, after warning Peter, Jesus says something to him. Follow me. And this is where the whole exchange begins to make sense. This is where we finally understand why John included the detail about casting the net on the other side of the boat. This moment is mirroring Peter's first day as a disciple. Let me read to you, from Luke 5.

> LUKE 5:1-11
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> *On one occasion, while the crowd was pressing in on him to hear the word of God, he was standing by the lake of Gennesaret, and he saw two boats by the lake, but the fishermen had gone out of them and were washing their nets. Getting into one of the boats, which was Simon's, he asked him to put out a little from the land. And he sat down and taught the people from the boat. And when he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, "Put out into the deep and let down your nets for a catch." And Simon answered, "Master, we toiled all night and took nothing! But at your word I will let down the nets." And when they had done this, they enclosed a great quantity of fish, and their nets were breaking. They signaled to their partners in the other boat to come and help them. And they came and filled both the boats, so that they began to sink. But when Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus' knees, saying, "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord." For he and all who were with him were astonished at the catch of fish that they had taken, and so also were James and John, sons of Zebedee, who were partners with Simon. 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.*
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> ENGLISH STANDARD VERSION

> MATTHEW 4:18-22
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> *While walking by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon (who is called Peter) and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea, for they were fishermen. And he said to them, "Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men." Immediately they left their nets and followed him. And going on from there he saw two other brothers, James the son of Zebedee and John his brother, in the boat with Zebedee their father, mending their nets, and he called them. Immediately they left the boat and their father and followed him.*
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> ENGLISH STANDARD VERSION

Look at how closely the two scenes rhyme.

TWO MOMENTS BY THE WATER	
First Call · Luke 5	Restoration · John 21
Peter is fishing.	Peter returns to fishing.
An empty night.	An empty night.
Jesus directs where to cast the net.	Jesus directs where to cast the net.
A miraculous catch, and a net, not a person of the old Peter.	A miraculous catch, and a net that holds, the new Peter.
Peter falls Jesus to knee because of his sinfulness.	Peter's confidence drives him toward Jesus.
"From now on you will be catching men."	"From now on, tend my sheep."

After Peter's failure and denial, Jesus meets him in the very setting where it all began. He takes him back to his first love, recommissions him in the same place as the first time, and extends a grace that would change Peter forever.

He meets you in the very place where it all began.

Mind Your Own Business

> JOHN 21:20-24
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> *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?" When Peter saw him, he said to Jesus, "Lord, what about this man?" Jesus said to him, "If it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you? You follow me!" 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?" 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.*
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> ENGLISH STANDARD VERSION

This is a simple truth that still speaks to us today. Keep your eyes on your own walk. What does it matter to you what God allows to someone else's life? We cannot be jealous or covetous of another person's road. Your task is the same one Jesus gave: Follow me.

A Year in John

We have spent the last year in this book together, and John has told us so much about his friend Jesus. We have seen that He is the Word made flesh, the creative force behind all things, the spoken Word of God, the exact representation of the Father's nature. We have seen Him care for the lives and souls of a people who were being abused by their government and their religious leaders. We have seen many miracles: water turned to wine, the hungry fed, the sick healed, the oppressed delivered, the dead raised.

We have seen Him confront the religious leaders with force, with tact, with truth, and with questions that left them walking away in shame. We have seen Him rebuke disciples when leaders in private and in public. We have seen Him introduce us to the Holy Spirit, to the New Commandment, and to the promise that He is coming again. We have seen Him slip away to pray. We have seen Him fight cultural norms. We have seen Him willingly lay down His life. We have seen Him die again, and we have watched Him redeem His friends.

The End

> JOHN 21:25
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> *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.*
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> ENGLISH STANDARD VERSION

And then John lays down his pen, not because the story has run out, but because it overflows. There was more than any book could hold, more than the world itself could contain. He gave us enough to believe, and enough to follow. This is where it all began, and this is where our year in John comes to rest.

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Soli Deo Gloria

Scripture quotations are from the English Standard Version.