

A summary of John 21:15-25

- 1. How do we feed the lambs and tend the sheep (brothers and sisters around us and gospel friends)? (John 21:15-17; chapter 20).** The Lord waited till His disciples had finished breakfast before asking Peter three challenging questions, and giving him three challenging commands. Jesus asked Peter three times if he loved Him, and commanded him first to feed His lambs, then to tend His sheep, and then to shepherd His sheep. Peter responded each time in the affirmative (he loved Jesus). So also may we. However, the Lord followed up His question with a corollary. If we say we love the Lord, the Lord will tell us to feed the saints (brothers and sisters). If we say we love the Lord, we must love the church because the church is what the Lord loves. The church is His burden, His heart's desire. If we only come to the Lord and not the brothers and sisters, and think that we love Him, such love may be limited. How then can we possibly feed and shepherd the Lord's "lambs" and "sheep?" We first need to be fed and shepherded by the Lord Himself. How? Through the Lord's fresh speaking to us through His word, which will lead us to experience His fresh feeding and shepherding. For example, some of us may have read the story of how Peter and the disciples fished all night but caught nothing (John 21:3-13), and we may even know it well. However, it may remain an interesting story about Jesus until the Lord speaks to us through the verses. As we saw in that account, the Lord is the One who is in control. He can cause the fish to stay away from, or jump into the nets. When He told the disciples to cast their net on the right side of the boat, they submitted and caught an abundance of fish. The Lord may then speak to us, through these verses, to submit to Him, even in difficult or unreasonable circumstances because He is the One in control of our whole life and all our decisions. If we do not have fresh experiences of the Lord, we may, like Peter in 21:3, with a good heart, resolve to do something according to our natural thought, even something good. Possibly Peter may have decided to go fishing, not just for himself and his family, but for the other disciples as well! What a good heart! Yet such a decision may lack the experience of the resurrected Christ. Therefore, in order to feed others, we ourselves must first be fed. Before we speak to others, whether in the church gatherings, or in small group settings, or one-on-one, the Lord must first speak to us.
- 2. Will we follow the Lord, regardless of our circumstances and environment, and if so, how will we follow Him? (John 21:17-19; 2 Peter 1:8,14-15).** In verse 17, Peter eventually "conceded the point" by acknowledging that the Lord knew everything. Indeed, the Lord did know that Peter loved Him, and He knew what would happen to Peter. He knew that Peter would love Him until death (vv.18-19). He knows what will happen to each one of us. However, regardless of what may await us, whether it be our family situation or church situation, we need to follow the Lord. For example, not many brothers and sisters participate in the corporate prayers, and many do not attend the Lord's day gatherings. Even our spiritual companions may stop coming. It can be easy for us to become discouraged and discontinue coming to the gatherings, or leave the church life. How can we follow the Lord in this situation? By feeding His lambs and tending His sheep. In the first chapter of his second epistle, Peter highlights several characteristics of our Christian faith conducive to our growth in the divine life, rendering us fruitful and effective (v.8). Fruitfulness, or bearing fruit, is very much related to the matter of feeding and shepherding the Lord's sheep, and no doubt the Lord's final words to Peter were indelibly etched in his memory and experience of Christ. Aware of his imminent martyrdom (2 Peter 1:14), Peter desperately endeavored to recall to the believers' remembrance the necessity of the growth in life, through being fed by the living, resurrected Christ, and through feeding and shepherding of others. This was Peter's lifelong experience, beginning with his hearing the Lord's words in John 21:15-17, and continuing his whole life to carry out what Jesus had told him. Thus, to follow the Lord is indeed to feed and shepherd the Lord's sheep, to bear fruit for the Lord, until death, or until He returns, regardless of the way that may lie before us.

- 3. We follow and serve the Lord according to how the Lord leads us, and not according to how He leads others (John 21:20-23).** The Lord spoke to Peter and even prophesied what kind of death Peter would suffer in order to glorify Him (v.v.18-19). No doubt, His speaking to Peter concerning feeding and shepherding His lambs and sheep was intended for all the disciples. Peter, quite naturally, may have assumed that John also would experience a similar outcome, and boldly challenged the Lord (“What shall this man do?”). The Lord’s answer may give us some insight into such an assumption, and into what our attitude should be towards other brothers and sisters: “...what is that to you? You follow me!” (v.22). Yes, the Lord will lead others in a certain way, but that leading may be different from the way He leads us. It is really none of our business to worry about how another brother and sister is following the Lord, or why they are not following the Lord like us. Rather, we need to take care of the Lord’s speaking to us and how He is leading us. For example, others may not be preaching the gospel. Do they need to preach the gospel? Yes, since the Lord says so. But do I (we) preach the gospel? Others may prefer to give messages or speak without the Lord speaking to them. What about me? For example, we may have to pay a price to follow the Lord, like Peter. What about others? It may seem that others are not paying the same price as us. Actually, John, according to history, was the only apostle not to be martyred. All the other apostles, including Paul, were martyred. Yet John was the writer of four books of the New Testament, written in his old age, the last two (Revelation and the Gospel of John) showing us the consummation of the age and the humanity and divinity of the Lord Jesus like no other book. How could John have written those books if he had been martyred earlier? Yet Paul was martyred but nevertheless wrote fourteen books! He was different from John and Peter. Each brother and sister, perhaps even in our spiritual team, has a particular portion which we must honor as we serve together. At the same time, we must honor what the Lord has individually given us. The Lord will lead them, and He will lead us.
- 4. A testimony or experience of the Lord in writing may confirm the truthfulness and sincerity of such an experience, and may even strengthen our faith, and the faith of others, when read later (John 21:24-25).** John bore witness of all the things that he saw, and wrote them down. His testimony is a true testimony (v.24). He also wrote in a book, as commanded by the Lord, what he saw, and sent to the seven churches in Asia (Revelation 1:11). A testimony or the Lord’s speaking to us through His word, when written down, can be read by others again and again. The Bible is a classic example. Without the written word, God could have spoken all He wanted, but only a limited number of people would have received the benefit. That is why the invention of the printing press by Gutenberg circa 1439 revolutionized the spreading of the gospel and the truth. For the first time, Bibles could be printed and disseminated extensively. God’s oral communication with man has always been reinforced, by God Himself, through the written form. When we exercise to write down the Lord’s speaking to us and our inspirations, our thoughts are liable to be focused, and there may be a clear burden in the message that the Lord wants to convey through us. A written document may tend to sift out unclear or unnecessary or exaggerated statements, and render our testimony true and genuine. In addition, it may strengthen our faith at a later time when we are weak and even question the genuineness of our experiences. A written appreciation or experience of the Lord can be used as a reference at a later time, and, when read, remind us of various instances of the Lord’s speaking to us in the past which we may have forgotten.
- 5. The Lord restores us to love and serve Him by feeding His lambs and shepherding His sheep (21:15-17).** The Lord asked Peter three times if He loved Him, perhaps reminding Peter of his threefold denial in chapter 18. Yet such a reminder was not made to inflict condemnation on Peter, but to strengthen and restore him. The Lord accepted Peter’s declaration that he loved Him, and His injunction to feed His lambs and shepherd His sheep was perhaps a statement of confidence and trust in, and commitment to Peter. The man who had denied Him could now shepherd others. This was a complete restoration of Peter. In our failures, the Lord comes to us to feed us and restore us, so we can love Him and feed His sheep. The Lord never brings up the past to condemn us, but rather seeks to restore us to serve Him with renewed strength and dependence on Him. What a loving Savior we have!