

“The Only Safe Path”
(John 21:20-23)

I. Introduction.

A. Orientation.

Last week,

We saw Jesus restore Peter after his denials,

To remind us that there are second chances in God’s kingdom:

He will forgive us

And He will still use us

Even when we fall,

When we repent –

Which we will do by His grace.

We also saw,

That after Jesus restored Peter,

He then renewed his call as an apostle,

And even revealed to him

The kind of death he would die to honor his Lord:

He would live to a good old age,

But he wouldn’t die a natural death –

His life would be cut short by martyrdom.

Church history shows us

That what Jesus said came to pass:

Peter was martyred at Rome –
 He was crucified upside down
 Because of his faith in Jesus.

B. Preview.

This morning, we see
 That John's realizing that Jesus knew the future
 Made him curious about his end as well,
 And so he followed Jesus and Peter
 Hoping Jesus might reveal it.

He did find out something about it,
 But he also found that what Jesus said
 Could be easily misunderstood,
 Which reminds us:
 That we must always pay careful attention
 To what the Scripture actually says,
 And not what we want it to say:
 If we would stay in the path of safety.

We'll look at three things:

1. John's interest in knowing his future, which is vocalized in Peter's question.
2. Jesus' response to Peter's question.
3. The misunderstanding that arose from Jesus' response.

II. Sermon.

- A. First, we see that John also appears to have an interest in knowing what the future held for him.

We read in verse 20, “Peter, turning around, saw the disciple whom Jesus loved following *them*; the one who also had leaned back on His bosom at the supper and said, ‘Lord, who is the one who betrays You?’”

Jesus had told Peter to follow Him,

And so he got up and began to follow,

Being thankful that he still could

Because of the grace and mercy of his Lord.

But what did Jesus want?

He wasn’t calling Peter apart,

As though he alone should follow Jesus

And the rest should stay –

This wasn’t the last time Jesus would appear to them,

Nor the last time they would be together.

They would all be together when He ascended,

And would all wait together

For the outpouring of the Spirit on Pentecost.

So what did Jesus want from Peter?

It’s likely that He just wanted to talk to him

Apart from the rest of the disciples –

About what exactly, we don’t know.

But as Peter begins to follow,

He turns around and sees *the disciple Jesus loved* following.

This is how John has been describing himself throughout his Gospel.

He doesn't name himself –

Perhaps thinking that it wasn't worth mentioning –

But he still describes himself in a way,

Not only that we would know who he was,

But that would also tell us why he followed Jesus:

It was because Jesus loved him.

Does John mean that Jesus loved him more than the others?

We've seen that the Lord had His favorites –

Those He allowed into His inner circle,

That were allowed to go with Him

Or be with Him on certain occasions,

When the others weren't.

Does he mean

That Jesus showed him more love than the others?

It's true that the Lord seemed to do so.

Again, he was in Jesus' inner circle of friends.

He was also the one that reclined on Jesus

At the Last Supper.

Maybe John simply meant that Jesus loved Him

Along with the other ten disciples.

He was simply overwhelmed by the fact

That Jesus loved him:

He loved him enough

To lay down His life for him,

And to take it up again

That He might save him,

Any one of these would explain

Why John followed Jesus

And why he was now following both Jesus and Peter,

Even though Jesus had asked only for Peter.

It's also possible

That John wanted to know

What Jesus had to say about his calling and his future,

Just as He had just told Peter –

That seems to be the way Peter interpreted John's desire.

John may have mentioned the Last Supper here –

And what he had done at that supper –

To explain why Peter accommodates him as he does next:

We read in verse 21, “So Peter seeing him said to Jesus, ‘Lord, and what about this man?’”

Peter literally asks: “Lord, to this man, what?

Which could mean, “What do you want him to do?”

Or, “What will happen to him?”

More likely, Peter was asking both.

“You’ve told me what I am to do: to feed Your sheep.

And you told me what will happen to me:

I will be carried where I don’t want to go.

What do you want John to do?

What’s going to happen to him?”

John had done Peter a favor

When Peter asked him to ask Jesus

Who it was that would betray Him.

Peter wanted to repay that kindness.

Now that he was in a position to help John –

Since he had been called to walk with Jesus –

He may have felt obliged to ask Jesus on John’s behalf,

Since John appeared to want to know as well

What Jesus had planned for him.

We would all like to know these things about ourselves:

What the Lord wants us to do;

How He intends to use us;

What's going to happen to us in the future:

He's actually told us –

He hasn't given us specifics as He did Peter,

But we do know what He wants us to do from His Word;

We know how He intends to use us –

If we are only willing to be used –

And we do know that if we trust and follow Him

We will one day be with Him in heaven.

This also shows us

That Peter was concerned about John –

He cared what happened to him.

Peter was actually praying for John:

What is prayer, but talking to Jesus?

This is what the Lord wants us to do for one another –

To be concerned for one another

And to take our concerns to the throne of grace.

That's what the communion of saints is all about;

This is what it means to be one body in Jesus –

We are to love and be concerned for one another

As though we are members of the same family –

Because we are.

B. Second, we see how Jesus responds to Peter's question.

We read in verse 22, “Jesus said to him, ‘If I want him to remain until I come, what *is that* to you? You follow Me!’”

It seems by the way Jesus responds,
That Peter is asking the wrong question.

Jesus was looking for him to say:

“Lord, what can I do to carry out Your will?

How can I faithfully endure this trial that is coming?

Lord, please strengthen my faith.”

Instead, Peter was asking

What John should be doing

And what was going to happen to him.

It’s alright to be concerned for one another,

And to pray for one another –

That’s what Jesus wants us to do –

But there are certain things

He doesn’t want us to know about others –

Things He has reserved for Himself.

And yet in His answer,

Jesus seems to give him a partial answer –

At least with regard to what will happen to him in the future:

“If I want him to remain until I come.”

He seems to imply
That John would not die a martyr's death as Peter,
But would remain until Jesus came.

Church tradition tells us
That John was the only apostle that wasn't martyred.
He had to face many dangers;
He was often imprisoned;
He was even banished.
But he finally died in his bed in his old age.

Everyone who follows Jesus
Must expect difficulties,
But not everyone will face martyrdom.
It's an honor when the Lord calls us to die for Him.
But if He doesn't call us to that particular honor,
We can still honor Him in other ways –
Such as using the time He gives us
To serve Him in His kingdom.

But what does Jesus mean
That John will remain until He comes?

Is He talking about His coming for John at death?
That's possible.

Was Jesus referring to His second coming –

When He would raise the dead

And translate the living –

That John would never see death?

We know he doesn't mean this,

Because in the next verse,

John specifically denies this.

Did Jesus mean

That John wouldn't die

Until He came in judgment

Against Jerusalem in 70 AD

Or sometime after this?

That's also possible.

All the other apostles were dead by that time –

John was the only one who survived:

Not just to 70 AD,

But for many years afterwards as well.

John was the apostle

That was given the honor

Of closing the canon of Scripture –

Which he did in Revelation 22:18 –

And of confronting some of the heretics
That would arise by then –
Such as Cerinthus –
An early Gnostic
Who denied that God made the world,
And that the Christ came to Jesus at His baptism,
Guided Him in His ministry,
But left Him on the cross –
And the Ebionites –
Who believed Jesus was the Messiah,
But denied His deity;
Insisted on following the Jewish Law and ceremonies;
Who, not surprisingly, admired James,
The half-brother of our Lord,
Who wrote the book of James
With its emphasis on the Law,
But rejected Paul as an apostate from the Law
Because of his emphasis on grace.
Jesus could have meant at least this much.

But then He adds, “What is that to you?”
This appears to be a mild rebuke to Peter’s question:
Why do you ask Me
What I have secretly planned for John?

Some believe that His comment

About John remaining

Is purely hypothetical:

“If I want Him never to die,

That’s no concern of yours.

I’ve told you how you are to die:

That’s enough for you.”

We shouldn’t be too concerned

About things that don’t have to do with us.

Jesus wants us to mind our own business –

At least when it comes to certain things.

Moses tells us

That the secret things belong to the Lord,

But the things revealed belong to us (Deu. 29:29).

We are not to pry into God’s secret plan

Either for ourselves or others.

Instead we are to do what we know the Lord wants us to do:

To concern ourselves with our duty each day,

And not worry about the things of tomorrow.

We are simply to follow Jesus –

Wherever He leads us.

We're also told in Scripture
 Not to judge our brother or sister
 On matters of Christian Liberty:
 To their own Master they stand or fall.
 If we pay attention to our own business,
 As our Lord calls us,
 We'll find we won't have the time
 To get involved in each other's business.

C. Finally, we see the mistake that arose because of Jesus' statement.

"Therefore this saying went out among the brethren that that disciple would not die;
 yet Jesus did not say to him that he would not die, but *only*, 'If I want him to
 remain until I come, what *is that* to you?'" (v. 23).

By the time John wrote his Gospel
 What Jesus said had been told to others,
 And they concluded that John would not die –
 That he would live to the Second Coming.

Maybe they chose to believe this
 Because this is what they wanted to believe.
 It's an old saying, "We believe what we wish to be true."
 If John never died
 That would be a great blessing to the church:
 In every age, there would be someone
 Who knew what Jesus meant in all He said.

As much as we might like to have an infallible interpreter,

We don't need one:

Jesus has given us His Word –

As an infallible rule of faith and practice –

And His Spirit –

To help us know what it means and do it.

He has also appointed teachers

To guide His people in the truth.

We don't need an immortal instructor.

We don't even need an infallible one:

If we did, the Lord would have given us one.

Jesus didn't say John would never die.

This false belief started

From a misunderstanding of what Jesus said.

This is why we can't build our beliefs on tradition –

Even on those that come from apostolic times.

This belief was early.

It was public,

There were many who held it,

But *it wasn't true*.

Should we then base our beliefs on unwritten tradition?

Should we base them on what the early church believed?

No, we should base them on Scripture alone.

We need to let Scripture interpret and explain itself.

How easy it is to misunderstand the Scripture.

We need to guard ourselves against this.

The first meaning that occurs to us when we read it

Isn't always the right meaning:

We need to read it and study it

Until we understand it.

We can use the history of its interpretation as a guide,

But we must always let it speak for itself.

What it says is important in every area,

Particularly when it comes to the Gospel –

If we get this wrong, we are lost:

You must trust Him,

And Him alone to get you into heaven –

And with regard to duty –

If you are to stay on the path of safety,

You need to know what Scripture really says

And not follow what you want it to say.

To clear up this misunderstanding,

John points to the words Jesus spoke

To show that they simply misunderstood His meaning:

“Jesus did not say to him that he would not die, but *only*, ‘If I want him to remain until I come, what *is that* to you?’” (v. 23).

We need to listen to Jesus,

And not force any meaning on His words

That aren’t in His words.

We must not add to or take away from Scripture.

If we do, we do so at our own risk.

The only safe path

Is the path the Scripture lays before us.

The Table again reminds us of this, this morning.

<http://www.gcmodesto.org>