

Obedient Love for the Lord Who Provides (John 21:1-25)

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Last Monday, the Richmond Times-Dispatch ran a half-page op/ed column from the LA Times by Hal Taussig entitled, "A New edition of the Bible, with 20,000 revisions, should spark 20,000 thoughtful conversations." Commenting on the New Revised Standard Version or NRSVue released last month, Taussig writes:

"The update represents more than four years of intense work of the National Council of Churches and a large group of scholars in the Society of Biblical Literature. The result is careful and creative revisions. Like all new biblical translations and updates over the past millennium, including the King James Version, this brings new meanings to biblical texts. Each iteration of the Bible addresses some need in the culture at that moment. I hope the updated edition fuels a wider public discussion about what the Bible is becoming in our era. For instance, the reasons for revisions vary greatly, prompting the overall textual meanings to spin out in many directions and broadening dialogue."

It sounds noble, sophisticated, almost exciting. It's also spiritual poison, my friends. What Taussig celebrates we should grieve. The goal of translating the Bible from the original languages in which it was written should never be to bring "new meanings to biblical texts." Scripture is not a human plaything we are free to reshape according to modern notions of identity and gender. It is inerrant and infallible Word of God.

A passage may have multiple fulfillments and countless applications, but it has only one meaning – an original and unchanging meaning established by the purposes of a faithful, unchanging God. 2 Peter 1:20-21, "No prophecy of Scripture comes from someone's own interpretation. For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit." Isaiah 55:10-11, "For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven and do not return there but water the earth...so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it."

Our goal in translating the Bible must always be governed by the essential nature of the Bible. And one of the biggest mistakes we can make is filling the words it contains with our own meaning instead of discerning what the original author,

under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, actually meant. Take John 20:31, for example, where John writes, “By believing you may have life in his name.” If I were to take the word “life” and fill it a modern, culturally acceptable meaning, I would say something like this:

Our lives are full of barriers to freedom and joy. If you believe in Jesus, he will empower you to live the life you’ve always wanted to live. You’ll be happy, healthy, and wealthy. You’ll have a friend who will always affirm and never judge you. And if you feel like your life is already pretty good, Jesus will make it even more amazing.

What’s wrong with the “good news” I just described? It’s a total lie. Why? Because that’s not at all what John means by “life” in v. 31. What does he mean? He shows us in Jn 21:1-25. He illustrates what life in Jesus really entails, what it looks like in action, by describing the third time the Lord revealed himself to his disciples after the resurrection. He teaches us that experiencing life in Jesus consists of several things.

1) TRUSTING THE LORD WHO PROVIDES

As Jn 21 opens, the small band of Jesus’ followers (or disciples) have left Jerusalem and returned to the Sea of Galilee (also called the Sea of Tiberias). Jesus has already appeared twice to them on the heels of his resurrection. Notice how John describes both the first two appearances and the one that follows in v. 1. “After this Jesus revealed himself again to his disciples...”

The word “revealed” is important, friends. We cannot discover or reason our way to the knowledge of God the way we come to understand math or art or marine biology. He makes himself known to us. True knowledge of God begins with his self-revelation, with what he has told us about himself through the world he made, through the written Word he inspired, and ultimately through Jesus, the Son of God incarnate.

So how does he reveal himself in John chapter 21? Seven of Jesus’ eleven disciples are together. One of them, Simon Peter, says, “I am going fishing.” The others reply, “We will go with you.” Now there’s nothing inherently wrong with fishing. But the timing of their decision, coming on the heels of Jn 20:21 where Jesus commissions them to preach the gospel, suggests they’re not particularly clear or enthusiastic about what they’re supposed to do. They’re spiritually adrift. They’re floundering.

Seeds of genuine faith have taken root in their heart, but they're not engaged in God's mission for their life.

The lesson Jesus gives them is foundational. Look at the end of v. 3. "They went out and got into the boat, but that night they caught nothing." To be a human being is to be created for a relationship of absolute dependence on God, not just in theory, but on Monday morning when you're trying to wire an electrical panel. It's true for moms. It's true for programmers. It's true for landscapers. Ps 127:1, "Unless the LORD builds the house, those who build it labor in vain. Unless the LORD watches over the city, the watchman stays awake in vain."

Have you ever found yourself in a situation where no matter what you do, it feels like you're constantly coming up short? You just can't seem to pass the test, hit the quota, make enough money, stay out of the hospital, keep your mouth shut, let go of bitterness, or spiritually lead your family? One of the most loving things Jesus ever does for us is bring us face to face with the reality of our weakness and insufficiency, with the poverty of human wisdom and strength. It never feels good. But it's the first step toward experiencing life in Jesus and frankly, a step we never move beyond.

Look at v. 5. Jesus calls to them from the shore, "'Children, do you have any fish?' They answered him, 'No.'" His goal isn't to shame them. His goal is to help them grasp their absolute dependence on the God who provides, not just for fishing but in every aspect of their lives. He's setting them up to recognize the truth of Jn 15:5, "Apart from me you can do nothing." Jesus responds in v. 6, "'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."

In every situation, whether you are running a painting company or resolving a conflict with your spouse, what's the key to experiencing God's favor and blessing? Hearing and obeying the Word of God. That's exactly what the disciples did. And the Lord showed himself faithful. He provided for them in a miraculous way. It's his gracious favor that makes anything we do fruitful.

John, the disciple whom Jesus loved, was the first to recognize Jesus. V. 7, "It is the Lord!" Peter's response is my favorite. He throws himself into the sea and begins swimming to shore. How did John know it was Jesus? Because what Jesus did that early morning was exactly what he had done for the last 3 years and what he's still

doing today through the power of the Spirit. He brings abundance out of barrenness. Life out of death. Plenty in the midst of want. Provision instead of poverty.

It's the story of the gospel, friends. We bring our sin. We bring our weakness. We bring our need for a Savior. And Jesus provides the salvation we need. He's the living Lord who provides for his people. The 153 large fish dragged ashore in their net proved as much. It should have torn the net. But it didn't. Why not? Because Jesus grants both the provision we need and the ability to receive and steward it. It's what the Christian life is all about – dependence on the God who provides.

In v. 12 Jesus says to them, "Come and have breakfast." They had worked all night. Jesus knew they were hungry. So, the hands that in that very moment continued to uphold the universe started a fire and made breakfast for seven hungry men. He doesn't just provide for our spiritual needs. He provides for our physical needs too. No need is too small or great for the God who provides.

They still have all kinds of questions. They long to ask him, "Who are you?" Is the man we saw die on the cross really cooking for us on the beach? Their doubts are not surprising. The character and ways of the living God always defy the categories of human logic and experience.

And yet, v. 12, "They knew it was the Lord." They recognized Jesus on account of his faithfulness to provide. He reveals himself today in the same way, friends. No one else saves like him. No one else deals with the reality of our guilt and shame like him. No one else anticipates our needs and provides like him. No one else reaches into our hearts and lives and makes all things new the way Jesus does.

He isn't standing far off waiting for you to get your act together. He's inviting you to his table. He wants to feed you. He wants to fellowship with you. He knows your needs and will provide immeasurably more than bread and fish. He will give you the gift of himself! He's the Savior you require. He's the God you were created to depend on. Don't try to rescue yourself by breaking all the rules or keeping all the rules. Come to Jesus because he's not dead. Experiencing life in Jesus means trusting the Living Lord who provides.

2) LOVING JESUS BY LOVING HIS PEOPLE

What is Jesus looking for in response to the life he provides? What does he require in return? It's not new. It's what he called his people to do all along. Deuteronomy 6:5, "You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might." He wants your heart, friend. He's after your affections. The right response to the life he provides is steadfast love for the Lover of our Souls.

V. 15, "When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, 'Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?'" Why does Jesus single out Peter with his question? And why does he use his old name, Simon, instead of Cephas or Peter, the name Jesus gave him when he first called him as a disciple? It's because of what Peter did in John 18 around another charcoal fire during Jesus' darkest hour.

He denied the Lord. He did not remain loyal to Jesus. He loved the approval of men more than he loved Jesus. Under pressure from his enemies, Peter refused to confess his love for the Lord. Earlier in John 13, he was so confident in his spiritual maturity. He swore he would never do such a thing. "I will lay down my life for you!" Matt 26:33 gives us an even clearer sense of the heart attitude behind Peter's boasting. "Peter answered him, 'Though they all fall away because of you, I will never fall away.'"

Jesus doesn't turn a blind eye to Peter's failure in John 21. He uses his old name – Simon – confronting Peter with the fact that when he denied the Lord, he was denying his new identity in Christ, turning back to the kind of man he used to be. Then he points to the other disciples and graciously gives Peter an opportunity to change his tune, to exchange self-confident boasting for the humility of love. "Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?"

Simon, I don't want the superior strength you once thought you brought to the table. I want your heart. Recognize your weakness. Confess your disloyalty. See the provision I made for your sin by laying down my life for you when you refused to lay down your life for me. I died so you could be forgiven. Don't boast in your own righteousness, Simon. Your own power doesn't make you a Peter, a rock. It's my power at work within you. Boast in me. Treasure me. Love me, Peter. For I'm the one who loved you first.

Jesus didn't owe Peter an opportunity to repent any more than he owes you and me, friends. In the greatness of his mercy, he poses the same question to us. Do you love him? Not do you believe he's a real person or has some good things to

say? Do you love me? Do you prize me above everything else in this world? Are your greatest affections reserved for me or have you given them to someone else?

J.C. Ryle, "Knowledge, orthodoxy, correct views, regular use of forms, a respectable moral life – all these do not make up a true Christian. There must be some personal feeling towards Christ." Why? Because he who has been forgiven much loves much. Jesus helped Peter recognize just how much he needed the Lord's forgiveness. He gave him the gift of godly sorrow. V. 18, "Peter was grieved because he said to him the third time, 'Do you love me?'"

Why did he ask him three times? Because that's how many times he denied the Lord. Jesus isn't rubbing Peter's sin in his face. He's giving him an opportunity to repent, to experience the Lord's forgiveness, to be reinstated as a true disciple. His grace melts Peter's heart. He abandons his old comparisons, his former confidence in his self-assessment, and he confesses his love for Jesus. V. 17, "Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you." The Lord's kindness leads him to repentance, to take refuge not in the strength of his desire but in the object of his affection.

And then Jesus says, Great. Now we've got the love box checked, what are you going to do with all those fish? No. Without disparaging Peter for fishing, he calls Peter to a different sort of labor, not once, but three times. V. 15, if you love me, feed my lambs. V. 16, if you love me, tend my sheep. V. 17, if you love me, feed my sheep. He tells a man who had earlier failed the Lord in spectacular fashion to humbly embrace the responsibility of pastoral ministry – to lead, feed, protect, and care for the people of God.

The principle applies to more than pastors. Jesus is saying in no uncertain terms that love for him is necessarily expressed through love for his chosen people, both those who know him and those who have yet to know him. Instead of disparaging her, or criticizing her, or assuming someone else will care for her, we gladly spend and are spent to build up the body of Christ.

That's hard work, friends! Caring for sheep is sacrificial and messy. It means sleepless nights, long days, getting bitten, stepped on, and pushed around. In the same way, loving people will always cost you something. But it's how we love the Lord himself! If you genuinely love the Savior who laid down his life for you, you will love the church. And if you don't love the church or find a criticism coming on whenever you think about the church, then you don't love Jesus.

So many of you excel at loving Jesus by loving his people and have for many years. To you I say, see to it that you do so more and more. Here's a practical way we do it on Sunday morning. When the service gets out, don't bolt for your car. Plan your day so you can linger. Introduce yourself to someone you don't know. Find out how they're doing. Pray for them during the week. And next Sunday, track them down to follow up. Take spiritual responsibility for your brothers and sisters in Christ.

And if you're not part of a Community Group, a small group of adults that's on mission to help one another follow Jesus in every area of life, join one. You can find a list on our website with the locations they gather during the week. If you hear yourself saying, "Pastor, I don't have time for that," remember this. A supreme love for Jesus will realign your resources, time included, with his priorities. If you're "too busy" to spend time knowing, praying for, and serving his people, then you need to evaluate whether you really love Jesus. Experiencing life in his name means loving him by loving his people.

3) KEEPING YOUR EYES ON OUR SOVEREIGN KING

In v. 18, Jesus tells Peter that a life devoted to loving God's people will cost him dearly. He tells him that when he's old he will die a martyr's death by crucifixion. John adds in v. 19, "This he said to show by what kind of death he was to glorify God."

Jesus didn't want Peter to be surprised by suffering. He doesn't pull a bait-and-switch. Following me is going to be amazing! Oh yeah, there's this little suffering thing I forgot to mention. No. He comes straight out in v. 18 and tells Peter devoting himself to the Lord's work compelled by love for Jesus will require death. Then he says at the end of v. 19, "Follow me."

His word to us is no different, brothers and sisters. To follow a crucified Savior is to die, perhaps not exactly like Peter, but to die nonetheless. It means dying to ourselves, to our authority, comfort, reputation, and earthly treasure. It means putting our sinful desires to death, waging war against the lusts of the flesh. It means swimming upstream in the current of this world by obeying God's commands instead of floating along with what everyone else is doing. Romans 12:1, "I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice..."

As hard as it must have been for Peter to hear, there's a precious comfort in Jesus' words. The sacrifices we must make to love God's people are not a mystery to the Savior who holds all things in his hands. He's a Sovereign King. He knows every detail of your life because he's in complete control of your life – past, present, and future.

And if you're willing to follow him, the death you die, like Peter's, will ultimately serve to glorify his name. Suffering for the sake of loving other people isn't meaningless. It shows the world the worth and beauty of Jesus. What a comfort to know he holds our future in his hands and that even the parts that are most painful will be to the praise of his glory and our eternal good!

Peter counts the costs and chooses to follow Jesus. But in v. 20 he turns. He sees John, the author of the fourth gospel, walking behind them and says in v. 21, "Lord what about this man?" He pulls the comparison lever. He wants to know how his future stacks up to the other disciples. Will they be crucified too? How will their suffering compare to my suffering? Am I getting a fair shake here or did I draw the short straw?

Look at v. 22. "Jesus said to him, 'If it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you? You follow me!'" Comparison is a deadly trap in the Christian life. It inevitably leads to the pride of self-righteousness – look at how much better I am – or the pride of self-pity – look at all the things I deserve to enjoy that I'm not getting. Don't focus on my plan, my sovereign will for others, Jesus says. Don't follow the people around you. Follow me. Obey me. Regardless of what I require from them, keep your eyes on me.

If you start thinking about how much better that woman's husband is, or how much better that guy's job is, or how much healthier those people are, or how many more papers that coworker has published, or how much harder you're working than other Christians, you will destroy your soul because all those comparisons will take your eyes off Jesus and the contentment, joy, and strength to persevere that comes from him.

Your times are in his hands, friend. Trust him with the work he has called you to do and boundary lines he has established. Even your foolish choices do not evade his sovereign care. Rest in knowing he will be faithful to glorify himself through your

life. If there were a better path for you to walk, providence would have appointed it for you.

Lament the sorrows you do not understand. Refuse to begrudge his perfect wisdom. And keep your eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, for he is the Good Shepherd, the Faithful Redeemer, who will bring you safely home. Love for Jesus is expressed through love for his people. And sacrificial love for his people requires keeping our eyes on Jesus. He is all you need.

CONCLUSION

No life is better than the life we find in Jesus. That's the message of the entire gospel of John. Those who believe Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, have life in his name. It's not a meager or a paltry or a slightly better than what the world offers sort of life. It's a rich and abundant life because the goodness of the One who grants it.

We've seen his glory chapter after chapter, verse after verse, over the last two years, have we not? We've been confronted on every page with the majesty and mercy of Jesus. And yet we will never plumb the depths of the salvation he accomplished for mankind through his life, death, and resurrection! The wonder of the person and work of Christ will forever be greater than we can imagine.

John's last words in v. 25 ranks among my favorite verses in the entire Bible, and I can think of no more fitting way to end our study. "Now there are also any 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."

Who can fathom all his wondrous deeds, my friends? Who can measure all that Jesus has done, is doing, and will surely accomplish through the power of the gospel? Let us respond to all we have seen by trusting the Lord who provides, loving him by loving his people, and keeping our eyes on Jesus, come what may. To have Jesus is to have life. For "no good thing does he withhold from those who walk uprightly" (Psalm 84:11).