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**JOHN,
THE BELOVED DISCIPLE**

***AS WE FIND HIM IN THE GOSPEL
ACCORDING TO JOHN***

New edition — 2004

*“Now there was leaning on
Jesus’ bosom one of His disciples,
whom Jesus loved”.*

John 13:23

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PREFACE

John, the disciple whom Jesus loved, enjoyed a very special place among the disciples as the Lord's friend and confidant. His example stimulates us to be better followers of Christ, and to live in daily fellowship with Him. There are at least five things which we can learn from John's position in close communion with the Lord:

- (1) We love Him because He first loved us.
- (2) Christ has gone into heaven and we see Him crowned with glory and honour. He shares His riches with us and cleanses us with the washing of water by the Word.
- (3) Because He loved us to the end, we side with Him here below as the crucified One.
- (4) We also walk with Him in newness of life in the power of His resurrection.
- (5) We wait for His return while working for Him as fishers of men.

1. INTRODUCTION

John's character and calling

Although the Lord appointed *twelve* disciples or apostles, *three* of them were especially privileged: Peter, James and John. They were among the first disciples and were called by the Lord to have a special place in His presence. He allowed them to follow Him into the house of Jairus, to watch His power over death and the grave (Mark 5:37ff.). He took them with Him on the mount of the transfiguration, to see the kingdom of God present with power (Mark 9:1-13). He answered their questions concerning the destruction of the temple with a discourse on the last days (Mark 13:3ff.). These three disciples were also with Him in the garden of Gethsemane, where they should have watched with Him in prayer (Mark 14:32ff.). Thus they witnessed special events, and were in more than one respect “eyewitnesses of His majesty” (2 Pet. 1:16). They beheld His glory (John 1:14).

James and John were brothers, sons of Zebedee, to whom the Lord gave the name Boanerges, that is, “Sons of Thunder” (Mark 3:17). This tells us something about their character. Always ready to defend their Master’s honour, they were even prepared to command fire to come down from heaven on the Samaritans who did not receive Jesus into their homes (Luke 9:49ff.). Apparently, these disciples had strong, ambitious characters. This is also evident from their wish to occupy the first places on the right and left hand of the Lord once the Kingdom would be revealed in glory (Matt. 20:21; Mark 10:35-37).

These incidents do not exactly arouse our sympathy for James and John. The meaning of John’s name — “the Lord is gracious” or “the Lord has shown grace” — seems a complete contradiction of his character as a “Son of Thunder”. Yet, the

Lord loved him and taught him in the school of grace. It is safe to assume that the beloved disciple changed in the Lord's presence. His eyes must have opened more and more to the greatness of God's grace and love as these were so uniquely brought to light in the Son of God's love (John 1:14-18; 3:16).

Among these three disciples whom the Lord took aside so often, John enjoyed a very special place as the Lord's confidant, the disciple whom Jesus loved. Thus this beloved disciple is a model for all who follow the Lord. All have to learn from Him to become gentle and lowly in heart (Matt. 11:29), in order to display a disposition totally different from our natural one.

The disciple whom Jesus loved

Let us, therefore, reflect on this disciple who always kept a low profile, and here — and also elsewhere — simply called himself the disciple whom the Lord loved (John 13:23; 19:26; 20:2; 21:7,20). What the Gospel says of John, is basically true of each follower of the Lord. All of us are objects of the love of Christ, who loved us and gave Himself for us. Although this love reaches out to all His own (Eph. 5:2), and to the Church in its entirety (Eph. 5:25), it is also very *personal* indeed. Therefore the apostle Paul could say: "I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved *me* and gave Himself for *me*" (Gal. 2:20). So in this general sense we are all disciples who are loved by Jesus.

However, practice shows that we need a certain measure of spiritual growth to be able to speak about our relationship with the Lord in this way. We must learn to keep a low profile and to efface ourselves and our own weak love for Him. In doing so, we shall discover more and more of His abundant love for us. The only thing that really counts is His love for us, for our love for Him is imperfect and changeable, while His love for us is stable and unchangeable. It is as strong as death

(Song 8:6). The *death* of the Lord Jesus proved the strength of His love for us. For He loved us *to the end* (John 13:1).

We rejoice in this love now, because it has been poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who was given to us (Rom. 5:5). We know that His desire and His love are for us in spite of what we are. This enables us to say: "I am my Beloved's, and His desire is toward me" (Song 7:10). In the light of this divine love, everything else becomes insignificant. In this respect it is also good to observe that the Greek word "agapao" is used for the love of the Lord for John. This word always indicates divine love, which originates in God Himself rather than in something attractive in us. God loves us because *He is love*. The same thing can be said of the love of the Lord Jesus for His own. He has shown the full extent of this love by going to the cross, by loving them to the end. In spite of the lack of understanding on the part of the disciples, He persevered in His love, fully proving it by delivering Himself up into death.

In the Gospel of John there are five instances where John is called the disciple whom Jesus loved. In only one of them the Greek word "phileo" is used, which indicates attachment, or affection (John 20:2). The Lord was indeed attached to John, the beloved disciple. The contrast between Peter and John in each of these Scriptures is noteworthy, since it accentuates all the more the unique position of John as the Lord's confidant.

We shall see the beloved disciple in the upper room, then by the cross and by the empty tomb, and finally at the Sea of Tiberias. The first scene, in the upper room, depicts our union with Christ in heaven, and the permanent need for cleansing by the water of the Word. The following events — by the cross and by the tomb — mark our union with Christ in His death and in His resurrection, and the last incident at the Sea shows the risen One to be the true Leader of all His disciples till He comes.

2. IN THE UPPER ROOM

John 13:23

Reclining close beside Jesus

John 13 brings us to the upper room, where the Lord washed the feet of His disciples and celebrated the Passover with them. Here we see Peter's impulsive and impetuous behaviour — as well as the utterly sad betrayal of Judas — contrasted with the worthiness and peace of John's leaning "on Jesus' bosom" (v. 23). The expression "on Jesus' bosom", or "on Jesus' breast" (v. 25), indicates that John took a place of honour at the Lord's right side. He reclined close beside Jesus, in the immediate presence of the Lord, in the place of trust and intimacy. John 13:23 reminds us of John 1:18, where we find the same phrase in the Greek text and in many translations. Christ was in the bosom of the Father, nearest to the Father's heart (NEB). He was the eternal Son, and being in the bosom of the Father, He was able to declare Him.

Now just as the Son Himself is the object of the *Father's* love, the disciple is the object of the *Lord's* love (cf. John 17:26). We too can enjoy a place with Him, very close to His heart, just like John. It will change our lives, for the awareness of the love of the Lord gives us both *peace* and *understanding*. Thus John could remain calm amidst the turmoil caused by the Lord's remark that one of His disciples was going to betray Him. Besides, John was in a better position than Peter to ask the Lord of whom He spoke, and to gain insight into this difficult situation. He had direct contact with the Lord.

John 13, by the way, is a chapter of big contrasts. The *love* of Christ caused Him to take the place of a Servant among

His disciples, thus correcting their selfishness and self-love. The *light* of Christ revealed Judas' heart full of darkness, and he went out immediately into the night (v. 30). In Peter we see the impetuosity and, later, the weakness of the flesh. In Judas we see its utter corruption. Peter did not understand the Lord, and was unable to follow Him in the strength of the flesh on the pathway of suffering and death. But later on he repented and wept bitterly. Judas could not be brought to repentance and became a pawn in the hands of Satan.

In the midst of this disarray, just before His suffering, we see how Jesus quietly reclined at table to eat and speak with His disciples. John, the beloved disciple, shared this peace, and felt happy in the Lord's presence. Although the sufferings of the Son of Man were casting their shadows, nothing could disturb John's peaceful fellowship with the Lord.

The place occupied by John in the presence of the Lord Jesus is an illustration of our own position as united with Christ in heaven (cf. John 14:20). In the midst of a hostile world that has rejected the Master, we still have a place in His presence — separated from the world and lifted up above the turmoil of our circumstances. There we are with Him "in the upper room", enjoying happy fellowship with Him as He gives us peace of heart and mind and insight into His own thoughts. In the same way as John enjoyed peace and received insight into the Lord's thoughts, we can possess true peace and knowledge of God's will. As beloved disciples, we know that we have a better portion than can be found in this world — a part with Christ in heaven after His departure from this world to the Father (John 13:1,8). For in Christ we have been blessed with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places (Eph. 1:3). May we enjoy undisturbed fellowship with our Master in heaven:

*O Lord and Saviour, we recline
On that eternal love of Thine.
Thou art our rest, and Thou alone
Remainest when all else is gone.*

The need for cleansing

The chapter begins, however, with the scene where Jesus washed the disciples' feet. This was a prerequisite for having part with the Lord, as He told Peter in no uncertain terms: "If I do not wash you, you have no part with Me" (v. 8). This washing is an illustration of the cleansing with the water of the Word of God (cf. Eph. 5:26). It is necessary to be cleansed of that which defiles us in this world — which is a wilderness wide to the believer — if indeed we wish to have fellowship with the Lord and to know ourselves united with Him in the place that He now occupies with the Father.

In addition to the one-time, complete washing that we receive in the new birth (John 3:3,5; 13:10; 15:3; Titus 3:5), we find three examples in Scripture of continual, repeated cleansing:

- (1) The washing of our feet as we have it here in John 13. This is a daily duty and it is necessary in order to have part with the Lord in heaven, to *recline* as His disciples at the table that He has prepared for us.
- (2) In order to *stand* as priests in the sanctuary, we must wash our hands and feet at the laver in the court, like the sons of Aaron (Ex. 30:17-21). This means that, before entering into God's presence with our sacrifices of praise, we need to submit all our doings and dealings to the cleansing power of the water of the Word of God.
- (3) In order to properly *walk* as believers on our way to the Promised Land, our heavenly home, we need the application of "the water of purification", just as the Israelites needed this in the wilderness in order to be separated from evil and uncleanness (Num. 19).

So let us be convinced of the necessity of being cleansed by the water of the Word, and willingly submit ourselves to it. It is a real must, for as the Lord said to Peter: "If I do not wash you, you have no part with Me" (John 13:8).

3. BY THE CROSS OF JESUS

John 19:26

The cross and its results

After the Lord Jesus was taken prisoner and sentenced to death, we meet the beloved disciple again at the cross. A mere handful of the Lord's followers was left there — the others had fled. The Lord found no comforters in His agony (Ps. 69:20). John, however, was among those few faithful ones standing by the cross (John 19:25-27). Unlike Peter, who denied being a disciple of this Man of sorrows, John faithfully followed his Master in the path of suffering. At first after the Lord's arrest, Peter had followed Him with John — who in John 18:15 is simply mentioned as "another disciple" (according to some expositors this must have been Nicodemus or someone else). Apparently Peter lacked spiritual power and perseverance to follow the Lord in His humiliation. He showed his weakness. And this confirmed the truth of the words the Lord had spoken to him, that he could not follow Him *now* (John 13:36-38).

John remained faithful, however, and sided with the Lord even in this hour of unspeakable reproach and deepest suffering. What made him do so? Probably it was the happy hours spent with the Lord in the upper room that gave him the strength to meet the test of suffering. Now it became apparent how strong the ties between the Lord and His beloved disciple really were. Of course, John's example contains an important lesson for ourselves as followers of the Lord Jesus Christ. It teaches us that a life in intimate fellowship with the Lord is an absolute necessity for His followers in this world that has rejected Him. Our fellowship with the Lord who ascended on high — "in the upper room" — enables us to follow the rejected

Saviour in His footsteps here on earth and to stay close to Him by the power of the Spirit.

Indeed, it is very important to take our place *by the cross of Jesus*, for there we learn a great deal. There we see Him hanging as the Sinbearer, the One who died for our sins and bore them in His own body on the tree (1 Pet. 2:24). There too, He was made sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him (2 Cor. 5:21). The big questions of our sins and of our sin-nature (indwelling sin) were settled there. For by Christ's offering for sin, God condemned sin in the flesh (Rom. 8:3). Our sinful flesh was condemned in the death of Christ, and met its end there. Our old man was crucified with Him, that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves of sin (Rom. 6:6). So by the cross we were delivered, both from our sins and from the power of indwelling sin. Now, set free from the law of sin and death, we do not walk according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.

This means that the cross determines our position as Christians to a large extent. Did you take your place beneath the cross of Jesus? Do you realize that your old self has been crucified with Him? And there are more lessons to be learned here. Standing by the cross we also learn that we have been freed from the law. We have become dead to the law, and are now married to Another, to Him who was raised from the dead (Rom. 7:4-6). This does not mean, of course, that a Christian is a lawless person, for he is under law toward Christ, and he fulfils the law of Christ (1 Cor. 9:21; Gal. 6:2). Our rule of life is *Christ*, and by the Spirit we are enabled to meet this high standard. The law of Sinai demanded from the Israelites to love their neighbours as themselves. The law of Christ — the law of love — asks us to follow in His steps, and even to lay down our lives for the brethren (1 John 3:16).

Reading Galatians, we see that the cross has brought a fundamental change in our relation to the law, to our own sinful flesh, and to the world. We have become dead to the law, to sin, and to the world (Gal. 2:19-20; 5:24; 6:14). These important

lessons are all to be learned by taking our place in true faith beneath the cross of Jesus. By the cross the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world. By the cross the world and the powers that rule it were completely judged (John 12:31; 16:11; Col. 2:14-15). The cross also laid the basis for the reconciliation, not only of the redeemed but of all things in heaven and on earth (Col. 1:20-22).

New family ties

Standing by the cross we also learn that, as disciples of the crucified One, we are not left alone in this world. We are linked with one another, and united into one body, one family. As members of the household of God we should support each other. This is clearly shown by the example of Mary and the beloved disciple. On the cross, Christ created new ties of fellowship between His mother and John: "When Jesus therefore saw His mother, and the disciple whom He loved standing by, He said to His mother, 'Woman, behold, your son!' Then He said to the disciple, 'Behold, your mother!' And from that hour that disciple took her to his own home" (vv. 26-27).

This third saying of our Lord on the cross reminds us of His words to Mary at the outset of His public ministry. How different these were: "Woman, what does your concern have to do with Me? My hour has not yet come" (John 2:4). On that occasion He had to admonish her, because in His service He could solely depend on the will of the Father. Now, having fulfilled His task and having reached the end of His life here on earth, He wished to comfort her and to alleviate her sorrow. While going through the most severe sufferings Himself, He yet paid attention to her and eased her pain. The consciousness that death was going to part them must have pierced through Mary's soul like a sword (cf. Luke 2:35). Therefore the Lord desired John, the beloved disciple, to take the vacant place. By

taking care of Mary from that hour on, he fulfilled the wish of the dying Saviour.

These new family ties illustrate our mutual ties as disciples of the Master. Believers are linked with each other by the finished work on Calvary's cross. There the Lord Himself knit us together in love and created very close ties of fellowship between the redeemed. He proclaimed these glorious results of the cross after His resurrection from the dead (cf. John 20:17). We make up one family, one household, for the Father calls us His *children*, and the Son calls us His *brethren*.

It comes as no surprise that John, in his first Epistle, has so much to say about the household of God and the relationships within the family of God. As children of God, we are born of God and we have to reveal Him in this world that does not know Him. Our mutual relationships should be marked by the divine features: God is light, and God is love (1 John 1:5; 4:8,16).

Within this household of faith there are different relationships, both with one another and with the Lord. John speaks of all the believers as "children" of the Father, but he also distinguishes between "fathers" in Christ, "young men" and "little children" (1 John 2:12-27). We should be aware of the relationships that the Lord has given between the members of His household, and take care of one another and help and support each other. We should always remember that in dying, the Lord not only united us with Himself but also with one another.

4. BY THE EMPTY TOMB

John 20:1-10

Witnesses of Christ's resurrection

John, the beloved disciple, witnessed not only Christ's crucifixion but also His resurrection from the dead. By the empty tomb of Christ we meet him again, together with Peter. Mary Magdalene had come to them with the alarming message that the body of the Lord had been taken away out of the tomb. This news prompted Simon Peter, together with the other disciple whom Jesus loved (v. 2), to set out for the garden tomb.

Peter, I assume, did so timidly, for his relationship with the Lord, whom he had denied, had not yet been restored. This was to happen later (possibly in the afternoon of this first Easter Sunday), when the Lord appeared to him privately (Luke 24:34; 1 Cor. 15:5). Some time after that he was also publicly restored before the disciples as a servant of the Lord (John 21). Therefore Peter was slower than John, although both of them, curious as they were, ran together to the tomb.

John — driven by his love for the Lord — was the first to arrive (v. 4). Stooping down and looking in, he saw the linen cloths lying there (v. 5). The Greek wording suggests that he looked sharply to see whether he could discern anything, as there might be something important to be seen (cf. James 1:25; 1 Pet. 1:12). Yet, the only things he saw were the linen cloths; the body of the Lord was gone. John, however, did not enter the tomb but waited for his companion.

As soon as he had arrived, Peter — ever the impulsive man — entered the tomb. He saw not only the linen cloths lying

there, but also “the handkerchief that had been around His head, not lying with the linen cloths, but folded together in a place by itself” (v. 7). This was a clear proof of the Lord’s resurrection. As someone else remarked: ‘After His resurrection the Lord rolled up the linen cloths and the handkerchief that had been around His head, and laid them in separate places, not hurriedly but calmly and deliberately, just like a person neatly folds away his nightclothes after a good night’s sleep’. And yet this was not sufficient to convince Peter of the fact that Christ had been raised from the dead. He departed, “marvelling to himself at what had happened” (Luke 24:12).

Once again, we see the contrast between Peter and John, for of John it is said that he saw *and believed* after entering the tomb (v. 8). But then even John failed in clinging to the Lord, for he did not stay and wait to meet the risen One. Leaving the tomb, he and Peter went away to their own homes (v. 10). Here Mary Magdalene surpassed even the beloved disciple in her dedication to the Lord, for she *stayed* by the tomb. She did not go home, but stood outside by the tomb weeping. And as she wept, she stooped down and looked into the tomb (v. 11). She longed to see the Lord, although she could only think of Him as the One who had died.

Her dedication was rewarded. She first saw two angels in white sitting at the place where the body of Jesus had lain, and they tried to comfort her. Then she turned around and saw Jesus standing there. She was the *first* to have the privilege of meeting Christ as the risen Lord, as is clearly confirmed by the account in Mark’s Gospel. “Now when He rose early on the first day of the week, He appeared first to Mary Magdalene, out of whom He had cast seven demons” (Mark 16:9). She came to know Him in this new capacity, this new character: as the One risen from the dead, who would soon ascend to the Father (v. 17). And she had to pass on the important message about His departure and the new relationships that had come into being within the family of God.

The importance of Christ's resurrection

It is important to consider these experiences of the disciples as they plainly present the resurrection as a historical fact; they also paint a picture of the disciples' spiritual growth. Their growth in the knowledge of the risen Lord is an illustration of our own growth in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ (2 Pet. 3:18). It is one thing to see Christ as the crucified One and to side with Him. It is another to know Him as the risen One and to be aware of our union with Him in this new capacity.

In order to be saved I must first focus my eyes on the crucified Christ and accept in faith that He died on the cross in my place, bearing the judgment that I had deserved. Secondly, I must believe in my heart that God has raised Him from the dead (Rom. 10:9). What is needed is faith in His atoning death, *and* in His resurrection from the dead. Both elements are essential to the Gospel message: Jesus our Lord was delivered up because of our offences, and was raised because of our justification (Rom. 4:25). That is why Paul says, "Who is he who condemns? It is Christ who died, and furthermore (or, 'more than that', NIV) is also risen" (Rom. 8:34).

Now what made Christ's resurrection so outstanding? What was the *superiority of the resurrection*, compared to the importance of the cross? The cross was necessary to put away our sins and to judge sin in the flesh. This was, in fact, a negative thing, although the cross also had the positive end of manifesting God's loving-kindness in the gift of His Son. The resurrection, however, was clearly positive, since something unknown came to light: an entirely new order of things came into being. Leaving death behind for ever, Christ entered into this new world of the resurrection. Having solved the problem of sin by His death, He now rose as the great Victor over Satan, sin, and death. He became the Firstborn from the dead, the Head of a new creation of which we are the firstfruits (Col. 1:18; Jas. 1:18).

Christ is the Firstborn from the dead, but we are united with Him as the firstfruits of a new creation. Our old man was crucified with Him, we died with Him, we were buried with Him. With Him we were also raised to a new life, and God even made us sit together in the heavenly places in Him (Rom. 6:4-6; Gal. 2:20; Eph. 2:4-6; Col. 2:11-12). Believers are the fruit of the travail of His soul, the yield from the fruitful Grain of Wheat that fell into the ground and died. We can say as new creatures: "Old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new" (2 Cor. 5:17).

One spirit with the Lord

In the light of these things we can, so to speak, take our place by the empty tomb with those disciples, Peter and John. We do this in the consciousness of our *union* with the Lord, who was buried there. The two disciples even *entered* the tomb, which is exactly the truth expressed by Christian baptism: "Therefore we were buried with Him through baptism into death" (Rom. 6:4). Baptism is a burial rite. Baptism in the name of the Lord Jesus is baptism into His *death*. We have put off the old man and we leave it behind in the water grave. This means that we have been made one with a dead and buried Saviour.

And yet this is not the full truth about the Christian position — there is more. Like Mary Magdalene, we have to learn to know the Lord as *the risen One*, who defeated death and the grave, and who has now returned to the Father. We are also united with Him in this wholly new position, across the river of death, across the grave. We belong to the family of the last Adam, the risen Christ. He calls us *His* brethren, and we call the Father *our* Father (John 20:17). What a tremendous privilege!

Newly converted people who put their trust in the Lord Jesus will not immediately realize the scope of these things. And we all need spiritual growth to understand how closely we are linked with the Lord. The story of these disciples illustrates

this. How much did they experience with the risen Lord, and how fast did they grow during those fifty days between Easter and Pentecost! First, they learned to know Christ as the true Paschal Lamb, by God appointed. Then they knew Him as the true Sheaf of the firstfruits, to be offered to God on the day after the Sabbath. For He rose from the dead on the first day of the week, the day on which the sheaf of the firstfruits of the harvest was brought before God (cf. Lev. 23). After many appearances of the risen Lord, they witnessed His ascension forty days later. They realized that He had taken His place at the right hand of God — as the Man in the glory (Acts 1). Ten days later, on the day of Pentecost, they learned to know Him as the One who baptized them with the Holy Spirit, thus building His body, His Church (Acts 2).

Reading further in the Book of Acts, we can only be amazed at the powerful testimony of the apostles concerning the risen and exalted Christ. They knew that they were united with this heavenly Lord, and they had accepted the clear consequences of this. Thus they had come far in the knowledge of His Person and the great results of His work. Even though they had known Christ according to the flesh, yet now they knew Him thus no longer (2 Cor. 5:16). Christ had entered a heavenly sphere, a new order of things, the basis of which He had laid through His finished work on the cross. In his ministry, Paul explains to us these new and heavenly things, and teaches us more about our union with the risen and exalted Lord. But all this begins by taking our place in genuine faith — just like John — by the cross and by the empty tomb of Jesus.

*I have died and have been buried,
Did descend into Thy grave.
To a sheltered haven carried,
Now I'm one with Thee, and safe.*

5. AT THE SEA OF TIBERIAS (PART 1)

John 21:1-25

I will make you fishers of men

Christians are closely linked with their risen and glorified Lord in heaven. As His followers they are serving Him here on earth till He comes. He is our Leader, our Captain, and the great Shepherd of the sheep (Heb. 2:10; 12:2; 13:20). This is clearly shown in the closing chapter of John's Gospel, which portrays John again as the beloved disciple. While John 19 focuses on the union of Christ's followers with the crucified One, and John 20 on their oneness with the buried and risen Lord, John 21 shows us our relationship with the Lord who ascended on high, and gave gifts to men (cf. Eph. 4:7ff.). He is the One who distributes spiritual gifts as He wills, and He leads us in our service for Him until His return. The fourth and fifth mention of John as the beloved disciple teach us important lessons about our present position as disciples and followers of the Lord Jesus (John 21:7,20).

John 21 is obviously an epilogue. The last verse of chapter 20 states the purpose of John's Gospel: "(...) but these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name" (v. 31). Chapter 21 describes in a typical way how the Lord prepared His disciples for their task as fishers of men. He told them to cast the net on the right side of the boat, which resulted in a miraculous catch of fish (v. 6). In this way He led them in their future service by revealing Himself in His resurrection power and His absolute command of all things.

Peter's initiative to go fishing at the Sea of Tiberias (v. 3), meant a return to his earlier profession. Apparently he had forgotten that the Lord expected him to be a fisher of men. Years earlier He had told him so, when He called His first disciples (Matt. 4:18-22; Mark 1:16-20; Luke 5:1-11). Peter tried to resume his old profession, but his encounter with Jesus changed everything. The Lord used the miraculous catch of fish and the following breakfast on the beach as the means to Peter's public restoration among the disciples. He wanted to re-establish him in His service, and to indicate the special place that Peter had in His plans and purposes with respect to the salvation of both Jews and Gentiles. Thus the closing chapter of this Gospel reminds us of the original calling of the disciples, and sheds new light on it. The risen Lord made a new start with His followers, and they definitely learned to follow Him as their Master.

Resurrection scenes

In this context it is interesting to note that Jesus' appearance at the Sea was now *the third time* He showed Himself to His disciples after He was raised from the dead (v. 14). This would speak of a divine fullness, a complete confirmation of the truth of His resurrection. On this occasion we see a group of seven disciples to whom He presented Himself alive (v. 2). In the previous chapter we find the first two appearances to a somewhat larger company of disciples — the first time Thomas being absent, the second time Thomas being with them (John 20:19ff.).

Besides these three occasions, there were more appearances between the time of His resurrection and His ascension (Acts 1:3), once to over five hundred brethren (1 Cor. 15:6). The Lord also showed Himself *on a more private basis* to some of His disciples: first to Mary Magdalene (Mark 16:9; John 20:11-18), and then to Mary's *companions*, the Galilean women

and other women with them (Matt. 28:9,10; Luke 23:55; 24:1,10). After that He appeared to Simon Peter (Luke 24:34; 1 Cor. 15:5), and later on that same first Lord's day to the two disciples on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:13ff.). He was also seen by James (1 Cor. 15:7). So there is enough evidence that the risen Lord manifested Himself more than three times.

Chronologically, this third appearance at the Sea of Tiberias, may have been the seventh or eighth appearance of the Lord since He was raised from the dead. It is significant that this appearance took place in Galilee and not in Jerusalem, the city where He rose and appeared to the eleven on the first day of the week. In Galilee He had spent most of His years. This part of the land was despised by the Jews (John 1:46; 7:52), and it was called "Galilee of the Gentiles" by Isaiah the prophet (Isa. 9:1,2). In this region full of darkness and of the shadow of death, the Light of the world had shone. But now, after His resurrection and ascension, this great Light would continue to shine to the Gentiles and extend God's salvation to the ends of the earth (Isa. 49:6). The risen Lord would do so from heaven in the power of the Spirit and by the ministry of His disciples.

But here another picture is used, namely that of the great Captain and His fishermen. The apostles would cast their nets into the sea of peoples and nations, and draw it up again with many converts. Galilee was also the place where they received the Great Commission, as it is commonly called (Matt. 28:16-20; Mark 16:14-18). The Lord even went before them into Galilee — this place of grace to the Gentiles. The disciples were to go into all the world and preach the Gospel to every creature.

Another important lesson of this passage in John 21 is that we are fully dependent on the Lord's instructions in our work for His name's sake. Without Him we can do nothing (John 15:5), and all our efforts will be in vain. What a painful lesson this can be! Headed by Peter, the disciples fished a whole night without catching anything (v. 3). Then, in the morning mist, on the beach, they saw a Man they did not immediately recognize.

He asked them whether they had any food (v. 5). Some translations use the words “meat” or “anything to eat”, while others read “fish”. What is meant is fish, of course, that could be eaten with bread to make it tasty (cf. v. 9).

In short, the Lord asked them whether they had caught anything that night. They had to admit that all their efforts had been in vain. They still did not recognize the Stranger, but He spoke with so much authority that they obeyed His command, and cast the net on the right side of the boat. Once before they had cast out their net at the word of the Lord (Luke 5:6,7). And again the result was miraculous: they were not able to draw it in because of the multitude of fish (v. 6).

It is the Lord

The dénouement followed immediately, for John, who knew the Master so well from being close to Him, understood intuitively that this Man could be none other than the Lord. He said to Peter: “It is the Lord!” Once again, Peter showed his impulsive character by jumping overboard to reach the Lord as quickly as possible (v. 7). He had shown the same desire before, when the Lord walked on the sea (Matt. 14:28). It is good to long for the Lord’s presence! But the other disciples came in the little boat, dragging the net full of fish (v. 8). In contrast to what had happened in Luke 5, the net was not breaking and the boat did not begin to sink. Peter was the one who dragged the net *to land*, full of large fish, one hundred and fifty-three (v. 11). When the first disciples were called, he was casting a net *into the sea* (Matt. 4:18).

This miraculous catch of fish portrays the work which would be done, in dependence on the Lord, among the nations. The disciples were to cast out the Gospel net and to gather God’s elect, as many as had been appointed to eternal life. In contrast with the parable of the dragnet in Matthew 13, where we find both good and bad fish, we have only *good* fish here —

a net full of large fish, one hundred and fifty-three. John has no nominal confessors in view, but only genuine believers. The mention of the exact number suggests that the Lord knows all His own by name. None of them shall perish.

The Book of Acts confirms that the apostle Peter held a very responsible place in this great work of fishing for men. He was, so to speak, to cast the Gospel net into the sea of peoples and nations. When he drew it ashore, it was full of converts, both Samaritans and Gentiles (Acts 8, 10 and 11). Peter and John acted together in Acts 8, in the same way as they had done in Acts 3 and 4, where we find God's work *among the Jewish people*. They had been partners in their old profession as fishermen (Luke 5:10). In their new activities, they were also good teamworkers — although they had distinct ministries. The Lord alluded to this after Peter's restoration. They personally had to follow Him wherever He would lead, but John's ministry was to extend until the end time.

It is not always easy to serve the Lord and to act as fishers of men. We see in this chapter that the Lord wanted to train the disciples for this purpose. When we pay attention to His commands, the results will be remarkable. But service in self-will ends in failure (v. 5).

Probably the miraculous catch of fish is also an allusion to the great response among the nations to the preaching of the Gospel of the Kingdom in the end time. In a coming day this Gospel will be preached again by converted Jews, and a great multitude of Gentiles will be saved (cf. Rev. 7). This Gentile multitude will come out of the Great Tribulation and enter the full millennial blessing of the Kingdom. This will happen *after* the rapture of the Church, which is composed of those who have not seen and yet have believed; and *after* the conversion of the remnant of Israel, who will look on Him whom they have pierced, and then will mourn for Him with bitter weeping (Zech. 12:10). The Church is typified in John 20 by the gathered disciples, and the believing remnant of Israel by Thomas who touched the pierced hands and side of the Saviour.

6. AT THE SEA OF TIBERIAS (PART 2)

John 21:1-25

Do you love Me?

Divine love, however, has to be the motive for our service as fishers of men. After Peter's denial he had to be brought back to this most important source of ministry. The catch of fish was followed by a breakfast on the beach, and Peter's public restoration. The Lord Himself had already prepared *everything* for the meal. When the disciples had come to land, they saw a fire of coals there, and fish laid on it, and bread (v. 9). As their Host, Christ invited His disciples to eat with Him: "Come and eat breakfast" (v. 12). This He had done so often during His life here on earth. They were *with Him*, before He sent them out to preach (Mark 3:14). They enjoyed His presence, and ate with Him.

This fellowship was here resumed at the Sea of Tiberias, before they were to go out as His witnesses into all the world. By now, all were convinced that it was the Lord. Is this not a valuable lesson for us as we follow Him? We should be active in His service, but it is also important to "come and eat" with Him, to rest a while and have fellowship with Him. We need to strengthen and refresh ourselves with all the good things which He Himself has prepared for us. "Come, for all things are now ready" (cf. Luke 14:17). In His presence we enjoy His fellowship and we are impressed with His greatness and glory.

This fire of coals will have reminded Peter of the fire in the courtyard of the high priest. There he had stood with the servants and officers while warming himself. There he had so seriously denied the Lord (John 18:18,25). The Lord's asking

him the same question *three times* must have been a painful reminder of his *threefold* denial. This is also shown by the nature of the questions. When the Lord had predicted that all of His disciples would be made to stumble because of Him, Peter had protested. "Even if I have to die with You, I will not deny You!" (Matt. 26:35). "Even if all are made to stumble, yet I will not be" (Mark 14:29). But he could not follow the Lord then (John 13:36-38). As it turned out, Peter was not any more faithful than the others. They all forsook Him and fled, and Peter denied Him three times. "Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall" (Prov. 16:18).

Therefore the Lord asked him this searching question: "Simon, son of Jonah, do you love Me more than these?" (v. 15). Peter could only acknowledge his failure and answer very timidly: "Yes, Lord; You know that I love You". But he used another word for "love" than the Lord had used, who had referred to divine love. Peter had to acknowledge that his affection for the Master was no greater than that of the others. Yet, he did love Him and he was truly attached to Him.

But the Lord repeated His question in a slightly different manner, and Peter gave the same answer (v. 16). Then He said to him the third time, borrowing the word Peter had used twice to indicate his affection for Him: "Do you love Me?" Now Peter was so grieved that he totally bared his heart, saying, as it were: "Lord, You know me thoroughly. You look all the way to the bottom of my heart, and You know that I really love You". But he had to admit that only the Lord's omniscience could assess this: "Lord, You know *all things*; You know that I love You" (v. 17).

This confession was sufficient for Peter's rehabilitation. The Lord gave him a threefold assignment in confirmation of this. The whole company of the disciples should understand that He wanted to use him again. We find special tasks after each reply. Peter was to feed the lambs of Christ's flock (v. 15). Further he should both tend and feed the sheep of the flock (vv. 16,17). Notice that the lambs come first. That which lambs need

most is *food*, while sheep also need corrective action to be guided on the right track. Just as we read in the Shepherd's Psalm: "He restores my soul; He leads me in the paths of righteousness for His name's sake" (Ps. 23:3).

In the miraculous catch of fish we saw *an allusion to Peter's task with regard to the Gentiles*. But in this commission to tend the sheep we have a *description of his care for the Jewish flock* (cf. John 10:3-4; Gal. 2:7-9; 1 and 2 Peter). Love for the Lord Jesus was to be the motive for such service, as it is for all service. "Through love serve one another" (Gal. 5:13; cf. 1 Cor. 13). Do we really love the Lord? Well, then He would like us to take care of His flock, to feed the lambs and to tend and feed the sheep.

Peter and John, and their ministries

Then Peter was told about the price he would have to pay for being a disciple of the crucified One. Now he would go with Him, both to prison and to death (Luke 22:33; Acts 12:3ff.; 2 Pet. 1:14). This had been his ardent desire in the upper room, but he could not follow Him then (John 13:36-38). In this pathway of discipleship — full of sufferings — he was going to be like his Master, for he was to glorify God by his death (vv. 18,19).

Then our attention is drawn again to John, the beloved disciple. The Lord told Peter to follow Him, repeating as it were his original calling as His disciple: "Follow Me" (Matt. 4:19). Peter, however, turned around and looked at John (v. 20). Seeing that the beloved disciple also followed the Lord, he became anxious to know what would happen to him. What about this man (v. 21)? Would he also have to die a martyr? Jesus' answer to this question was: "If I will that he remain till I come, what is that to you? You follow Me" (v. 22). Discipleship is first of all a *personal* matter. John followed the Lord of his own account, he did not need a special order to do so.

In this context, the Gospel writer reminds us of what had happened in the upper room (v. 20). Because the beloved disciple had occupied a place of confidence with the Lord, he had no trouble to understand His will, and following Him was a matter of course for him. It is clear from this passage that — although we have a common Master — each disciple has to follow Him *personally*.

My interest in my brother can easily degenerate into meddlesomeness. Therefore the Lord exhorts each of us separately: “You follow Me”. Each disciple has a particular place and a particular task. The Lord is the only One to decide what will happen to my brother or my sister, and the way in which He leads is good. That does not mean that we are to be independent of each other. This is shown by the beautiful example of Peter and John working *together* in the Master’s service (Acts 3:1; 4:13; 8:14). Yet, these two apostles had their own special ministries; this is clear from the inspired Scriptures they left to the Church.

We have already seen that the apostle Peter was entrusted with the care of the flock that Christ would lead out of the Jewish sheepfold. But there were other sheep to be added, which were not of this fold — Gentile believers (John 10:16). God also granted to the Gentiles repentance to life, as we can observe in the Book of Acts. For them Peter was to open the door of faith (Acts 10 and 11). He was to cast the Gospel net into the sea of peoples and nations and to draw it ashore, full of good fish.

The apostle John, however, received a different, less eye-catching task. His ministry was more concerned with the Person of the Lord Himself, whom he knew so well. This was already suggested by his place of intimacy on Jesus’ bosom. Therefore John wrote about true knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ, the Word of life, that eternal life which was with the Father and was manifested to us (for the eternal Word became flesh and dwelt among us). This knowledge of Christ’s Person is life-giving and results in spiritual fellowship with the Father and with the Son

(John 17:3; 1 John 1:1-4). The truth that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is the firm foundation that will remain (1 John 4:1-6). It remains in spite of all decline and serious failure to answer to our heavenly calling.

While Peter's ministry relates to *the beginning period* of the Church, and Paul's to *the prime* of its life, John's ministry relates to *the end time*. To this the Lord alluded by saying: "If I will that he remain till I come". These meaningful words imply that John's task was to span the whole period till the second coming of Christ. Just think of the last Book of the New Testament, the Revelation that gives an insight into the things of the end time, the things which will take place after the Church period (Rev. 1:19). Also think of John's Gospel and his Epistles, which deal with the truth which was from the beginning and will be with us for ever. These writings contain truth that cannot be affected by human failure. For they bear witness of that eternal life which was manifested here on earth, and is now our sure portion in the Son.

When the Lord called His first disciples, Peter was *casting a net* into the sea, whereas John was busy *mending* nets (Matt. 4:18-22; Mark 1:16-20). These different activities are typical of the distinct ministries of these two apostles. Peter was the one to cast out the net: he started the work of the gathering together of the Church. John, however, was the one to mend the nets. That is, John's ministry provides what is needed to continue the work when it is threatened by corruption, when decline has begun, when evil has come in. We see this in his battle against the false teachers who did not abide in the doctrine of Christ. He wrote about the many antichrists who denied that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh (1 John 2:18; 4:1-6; 2 John).

Till He comes

Finally, John's example teaches us that we are to look forward to the glorious return of our Lord. One disciple may

have to lose his life for the sake of his testimony — like Peter. Another servant may remain until the coming of the Lord — like John. We do not know which path the Lord has mapped out for us. It all depends on His will: “*If I will* that he remain till I come” (v. 22). Each one of us must personally follow the Lord and serve Him while waiting for His imminent return. We are to act as watching servants.

This is also shown by the Lord in the parabel of the ten minas: “Do business *till I come*” (Luke 19:13). Perhaps the Lord will leave us here till the moment of His coming. Then we who are alive and remain shall be changed and caught up together with the raised dead to meet the Lord in the air (1 Cor. 15:51-52; 1 Thess. 4:15-18). John represents the first category, the people who will remain until Christ’s coming. Peter represents the second category, those who have died but will be raised at the word of command of the Lord.

The final verses of John 21 confirm that the beloved disciple is the author of this Gospel: “This is the disciple who testifies of these things, and wrote these things; and we know that his testimony is true” (vv. 24,25). How thankful we should be for the glad tidings he has written that we may believe “that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing we may have life in His name” (John 20:30,31).

May the example set by John, the beloved disciple, stimulate us to be better followers of Christ. May we, like he, learn to have fellowship with our Lord on high, to side with the crucified One, to live on earth in the power of His resurrection, and to wait for His return while working for Him!