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# What shall this man do?

*About discipleship in the Lord's absence*

John 21:21

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## Peter and John, and their ministries

In the miraculous catch of fish in John 21 we see an allusion to Peter's task with regard to the Gentiles. But in his 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.

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 suffering – he was going to be like his Master, for he was to glorify God by his death (verses 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, those 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 parable 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" (verses 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!

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