

## 21:1-25 | The Epilogue

Before explaining what an "epilogue" is, we must consider whether this section is the original ending of John's account or if this appendix proves that the Beloved Apostle retconned his material. Many brilliant and believing commentators have argued that John's epilogue is a later addition. There are a variety of reasons why they hold this view, but, broadly speaking, it boils down to three points: first, it is argued that 20:30-31 has a ring of finality to it, and second, it appears that the epilogue's purpose differs from that of the rest of the account, namely, to correct a misunderstanding that the Beloved Apostle wouldn't die before Christ's return (cf. 21:23), and, lastly, many of the words in chapter 21 are not used elsewhere in the book.

Admittedly, there is much to commend this view. However, against this interpretation, many ancient documents, particularly those of a legal nature like John's account, "have appendices as a normative feature."<sup>1</sup> The Beloved Apostle was product of his time, and his writing is evidence of this. While it is true that 21:23 ensures no controversy will result from John's death, to say that this is the purpose of the epilogue ignores the multiple points at which this chapter is connected to the rest of the book (e.g., Peter's three-fold confession mirrors his three-fold denial; this resurrection appearance is the third of three, harkening back to those in chapter 20; the testimony motif; etc.). Lastly, though chapter 21 uses vocabulary not used elsewhere in John's account (e.g., "fishing," "feed," "naked," etc.) and there are some linguistic oddities (e.g., the "we" of vs. 24), there's no drastic break in the writing style.<sup>2</sup> There is unity and continuity from the beginning of Chapter 1 to the end of Chapter 21.<sup>3</sup> Even those who say that chapter 21 is a later addition, few of them deny a Johannine authorship (cf. 21:24).

Moreover, it stands to reason that if John began his account with a prologue (1:1-18), he'd likely end it with an epilogue; the two sections serve as fitting bookends, giving symmetry to the account.<sup>4</sup> And most convincingly of all, there are *no* manuscripts of John's account without chapter 21.<sup>5</sup> If, as some claim, there's a version of John without the epilogue, there'd be textual evidence. But as it stands, the book we have today is the same as the one held by Christians two thousand years ago.

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<sup>1</sup> Klink (2016), p. 892.

<sup>2</sup> Carson (1991), p. 668.

<sup>3</sup> Morris (1995), p. 757, "As far as we can see, this last chapter came from the same pen as did the first twenty."

<sup>4</sup> Köstenberger (2008), p. 586, provides a helpful graph that clarifies this point.

<sup>5</sup> Keener (2003), 2:1219, "[Westcott] observed that we lack any textual evidence that the Gospel ever circulated without this "appendix.""

In literature, an "epilogue" rounds out the narrative's overall thrust. It helps reinforce main ideas and tie up loose ends, providing the readers a sense of completion and filling out their understanding. This should not be confused with an author's "afterword," which is a concluding statement addressed directly to the readers and, as such, is entirely *separate* from the plot. In contrast, an epilogue still occurs *within* a narrative even though it is detached from the main storyline (e.g., *Apollo 13's* last scene before the credits).

Interestingly, John's epilogue primarily consists of one event and one dialogue between Jesus and Peter. Seven apostles head to the Sea of Tiberias, apparently returning to their former occupation as fishermen (cf. vs. 1-3). But though they labored all night, they failed to catch even a single fish. Then, as dawn breaks, they unknowingly encounter the risen Lord who, just as he did before (cf. Lu. 5:5), tells them to cast their nets once more (cf. vs. 6). They obey and end up catching so many fish the disciples must drag the net to the shoreline rather than haul it aboard (cf. vs. 6). By this point, everyone realizes that it was Jesus who gave the advice, and they all eat breakfast together. Afterward, Peter is thrice commissioned to "feed" the sheep of the Lord (cf. vs. 15-17), the fates of both the lead and beloved apostles are contrasted (cf. vs. 18-23), the author of this account identifies himself (cf. vs. 24), and, lastly, we're told that most of Jesus' deeds haven't been recorded (cf. vs. 25).

All told, John's epilogue does a lot of heavy lifting. It rounds out Peter's story arch. It illustrates the importance of making the Lord our primary love, prioritizing our relationship with God above all other relationships and commitments. It equates following Jesus with dying for him, emphasizing the sacrificial nature of discipleship. It hints at Jesus' return, reminding us of our hope in Christ's second coming. It even relays the fragility of the human heart and our propensity to backslide, highlighting the need for constant vigilance and reliance on God's grace and strength.

But most importantly, this final chapter highlights the Lord's steadfast love. Should his sheep ever wander, the Good Shepherd will seek them out, and when he finds them, he'll feed them, welcoming them into the fold once more. And all under-shepherds who follow in Jesus' footsteps—i.e., apostles, pastors, and ministry leaders, those who are called to care for and guide God's people—will show the same courtesy to God's sheep that God has shown to them. As Keener so aptly puts it, "Loving Jesus requires Jesus' servants to love Jesus' followers."<sup>6</sup> If anything but love for Christ is at the heart of a church leader, rest assured, the church will starve.

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<sup>6</sup> Keener (2003), 2:1225.

## Exegesis

**Vs. 1-2** – John tells us “after” his appearance to Thomas and the others (20:24-29), “Jesus shewed himself again to the disciples at the sea of Tiberias; and on this wise shewed he himself.” The “sea of Tiberias” is also known as “the Lake of Gennesaret” (cf. Lu. 5:1) or, more frequently, it is referred to as “the Sea of Galilee” (cf. Matt. 4:18-22). That the disciples appeared to have left Jerusalem shouldn’t surprise us.<sup>7</sup> The women who first interacted with Jesus after the resurrection were commanded by him to “go tell my brethren [to] go into Galilee, and there shall they see me” (Matt. 28:10; cf. Matt. 26:32; Mar. 14:28; 16:7; Lu. 24:6). Thus, it seems the apostles finally began trusting the testimony of their female friends (cf. Lu. 24:11).

The Greek term **φανερώω** (*phanerōō*), translated as “shewed,” is a key term throughout John’s account. John the Baptist said the purpose of his baptism was to “manifest [*phanerōō*]” the Lamb of God to Israel (1:29-31). John the Beloved said the purpose of Jesus’ miracles “manifested forth [*phanerōō*] his glory” (2:11). Jesus said that those who are truthful in their behavior do not cower in the darkness but “cometh to the light, that his deeds may be made manifest [*phanerōō*]” (3:21). The blind man was born that way so that “the works of God should be made manifest [*phanerōō*] in him” (9:3). In his prayer, the Lord said, “I have manifested [*phanerōō*] thy name unto the men which thou gavest me out of the world” (17:6). As with its usage elsewhere, the use of *phanerōō* here indicates that this physical manifestation of the Lord by the Sea of Galilee serves a *revelatory* function.<sup>8</sup> In other words, Jesus did not simply wish to *encourage* his apostles by his appearance; he wanted to *reveal* something to them. What that something is will be made apparent as the narrative progresses.

Seven of the eleven apostles were present for the events about to be described: "Simon Peter, and Thomas called Didymus, and Nathanael of Cana in Galilee, and the sons of Zebedee, and two others of his disciples." On the meaning of "Didymus," see notes 11:16. Of course, Peter, Thomas (cf. 11:16; 14:5; 20:24-29), and Nathanael (cf. 1:43-51) need no introduction.

Admittedly, learning that Nathanael was from "Cana," a city roughly 10 miles west of the Sea of Galilee and the site of the first two miracles (cf. 2:1-11; 4:46-54), is new information, though. "The sons of Zebedee," aka James and John, haven't otherwise been named in John's account.

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<sup>7</sup> The command that the apostles “should not depart from Jerusalem but wait for the promise of the Father” (Ac. 1:4) is given forty days (cf. Ac. 1:3) after the resurrection when the disciples were already in the city for the Feast of Pentecost.

<sup>8</sup> Carson (1991), p. 662; Köstenberger (2008), p. 588, “Indeed, Jesus’ progressive self-disclosure is the constitutive element of John 21, which moves “from lack of knowledge to knowledge limited to the Beloved Disciple to knowledge shared by all” (Gaventa 1996:243).”

This is remarkable considering the Synoptics frequently referenced the pair (cf. Mat. 17:2; 26:37; Mar. 5:37; 10:35; Lu. 5:10; 8:51; etc.). Thus, even when he could've easily named himself, John refuses; he gets right up to the line but doesn't cross it.

It is hard to settle the identities of the "two other of his disciples." Andrew and Phillip are both from Galilee (cf. Jn. 1:44), so they are the most likely candidates.<sup>9</sup> Also, Andrew is not only Peter's brother, but he was also a fisherman by trade (cf. Matt. 4:18). And not only does Philip seek out Nathanael and introduce the latter to Jesus (cf. 1:45-49), implying the two had a close connection, with one exception (cf. Ac. 1:13), the two men are almost always paired together in the list of the twelve (cf. Mat. 10:3; Mar. 3:18; Lu. 6:14).<sup>10</sup> If this interpretation is correct, that means Matthew, James the son of Alphaeus, Thaddeus/Judas the son of James, and Simon the Zealot were absent. But it is impossible to know for certain.

Additionally, while it is important to establish that multiple apostolic witnesses were present for this event, the key players in this passage are Jesus and Peter. As has been the case for every chapter thus far, so is it true for the last chapter. Though our faithful narrator was present at this moment, he would instead focus our attention on others rather than himself.

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<sup>9</sup> Admittedly, Matthew is from Capernaum, a city on the northwest shore of the Sea of Galilee, but it is doubtful that a former tax collector would suddenly pick up fishing.

<sup>10</sup> Bartholomew = Nathanael.

## VIDEO DESCRIPTION

### **Deep Dive: The Gospel of John | Week 99 | John 21:1-2**

**SPEAKER:** Ben Hyrne, Pastor

This final chapter highlights the Lord's steadfast love. Should his sheep ever wander, the Good Shepherd will seek them out, and when he finds them, he'll feed them, welcoming them into the fold once more. And all under-shepherds who follow in Jesus' footsteps—i.e., apostles, pastors, and ministry leaders, those who are called to care for and guide God's people—will show the same courtesy to God's sheep that God has shown to them. As Keener so aptly puts it, "Loving Jesus requires Jesus' servants to love Jesus' followers" (Keener 2003, 2:1225). If anything but love for Christ is at the heart of a church leader, rest assured, the church will starve.

**Pastor's manuscript can be found here:** <https://bit.ly/42hDRDD>

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### **Grace Pointe Baptist Church**

12029 Eastern Ave.

Baltimore, MD 21220

**Contact:** [info@GracePointeLife.com](mailto:info@GracePointeLife.com)

**Website:** <https://www.gracepointelife.com>

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