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## Another Revealing Appearance

### John 21:1-7

**Intro:** Finally, we have come to the 21<sup>st</sup> chapter of John's Gospel! It's taken us awhile to get here but although the journey has been long, it has also been quite instructive. The first thing we need to address concerning **ch21** is the surprising fact that there actually is a 21<sup>st</sup> chapter. As we noted last time, the overriding characteristic of John's Gospel is that it is simply a long series of testimonies to the character and nature of Jesus Christ. From **ch1** to **ch20**, John has been consistently and clearly revealing to the reader exactly who Jesus is and he has done this through the verbal testimonies of those individuals who were direct eyewitnesses of His earthly life and ministry.

This gradual revelation of Jesus reached its climax at the end of **ch20** when Thomas falls down and worships Jesus, confessing Him to be none other than his Lord and his God! When you further consider that John goes on to provide his purpose for writing this Gospel in **vs30-31**, it would appear to be a logical literary conclusion to the narrative and would seem to mark the end of the book as a whole. What else could be added to contribute to this stated purpose than maybe a description of Jesus' ascension back into heaven? But John doesn't give any of that information. Thus, **ch21** seems to be the strangest of all chapters because it appears to many to have been added after the fact.

The oddity or difficulty of **ch21** has prompted many theologians and Bible students to propose that the chapter was added to the Gospel later, probably by a different author. The problem with this theory is that it is not backed up by manuscript tradition or evidence. This chapter appears in all the earliest manuscripts of John's Gospel. The presumed problem with this chapter is not solved by ascribing it to another author; it's solved by having a better grasp on the literary style of John's extensive writings.

The key to understanding **ch21** is to see it as a parallel to the first half of **ch1**. When we began our study of John, we first looked at **1:1-14** and identified it as the prologue to John's Gospel. This is basically a general summary of the pre-incarnate activity of Jesus; Who He is eternally and what that means for the recipients of God's plan of salvation.

Ch21, then, is the epilogue of the book which deals with the post-resurrection ministry of Jesus, revealing how He rules His church and directs its members in their Christian growth and service. Ch21 is actual history (it happened) but it's also symbolic history that provides the essential principles of Christ's rule over the church in this age.

There are several reasons why John included this chapter. It seems John was reluctant to end his Gospel without explaining how Peter was reinstated to his apostleship by Jesus. None of the other Gospel writers include this event in their accounts. But, without the information John provides here, we would be clueless as to why Peter figures so prominently in the first 12 chapters of the Book of Acts. Another reason is that John wanted to dispel a false rumor that had spread among the early church that he wouldn't die before Jesus returned to the earth in glory. John makes it abundantly clear that the statement of Jesus, from which the rumor began, had been greatly misunderstood.

While these reasons are necessary and important, I am of the opinion that the main reason John included this chapter at the end of his Gospel was to teach believers how they are to relate to the risen Lord. In the 40 days between the resurrection and His ascension, Jesus appeared and disappeared at will; visiting with the disciples and preparing them for the imminent arrival of the Holy Spirit and their future ministries. They never knew when Jesus would show up so they had to stay alert, their hearts and minds constantly ready to receive divine instruction. This was an important time for the disciples as they were about to take Jesus' place in the world and carry the message of the Gospel to others. This 1<sup>st</sup> century mindset has never stopped being necessary and those believers who truly seek to carry out the work of Christ on this earth will still carry that attitude today.

Since ch12 serves as a primer of Christ's rule over the church; we will see in it glimpses of (1) the assembled church, (2) an example of the possibility of serving Christ in the energy of the flesh and (3) the futility of those efforts. We'll see (4) Christian work as directed by Jesus and the blessing that flows from obeying His direction. We'll also see (5) Christ's earthly provision for His followers, (6) the only acceptable motive for Christian service, (7) the value of diversity within the church, (8) the importance of regular feeding on the Word of God, and (9) the necessity for close personal discipleship for all Christians. All of these principles are still very applicable to the Christian

walk today.

**1-2** – John records another of the several appearances of Jesus to His disciples but instead of the upper room, this appearance takes place in the region of Galilee, by the Sea of Tiberias (Galilee). Here we see a group of 7 of the disciples coming together in Galilee. This is significant in itself because when Jesus was arrested and crucified, the disciples all scattered back to their separate homes and familiar places. This was to be expected – the shepherd was smitten and the sheep were scattered. Yet, here they are in Galilee, where everyone knew them; not scattering but holding together as if they were still a special company of disciples with a unique bond. What can account for this?

Alexander Maclaren has commented, “There is only one explanation . . . Jesus Christ had risen from the dead. That drew them together once more. You cannot build a church on a dead Christ; and of all the proofs of the Resurrection, I take it that there is none that it is harder for an unbeliever to account for, in harmony with his hypothesis, than the simple fact that Christ’s disciples held together after he was dead, and presented a united front to the world.”

It’s not just significant that they were together, it’s also important to notice all who were there (**v2**). The first 2 names listed are significant: Thomas was the stubborn unbeliever that Jesus had just appeared to in the previous chapter. Simon Peter was the shameful denier who is to be recommissioned to service in subsequent verses. If this small group serves as a microcosm of the assembled church, it would be difficult to miss the glaring truth that the church is made up of those who once were doubters, deniers and sinners of many stripes, but who have been brought to faith by Jesus Christ and have had their sins forgiven. These are, in fact, the ones who do Christian work—normal people, with all the same foibles and failings that we have, not some fictitious characters of superhuman faith and strength.

2 of these disciples are mentioned in the 1<sup>st</sup> chapter: Simon Peter and Nathaniel and as such, they are a testimony to God’s perseverance with those who are His own. Those whom the Father calls follow Jesus and none of them will be lost. The sons of Zebedee are James and John, of course, but 2 of the group remain unnamed and for good reason. These 2 represent the vast multitude of anonymous disciples – those whose names are never

published, whose deeds are never recorded in human documents. Yet, Jesus manifested Himself to these 2 just as much and in the same measure as the others. These 2 unnamed disciples represent the majority of all believers.

**3** – Some say it was wrong for Peter to go fishing, claiming it's a compromised return to a former occupation. Others say Peter wasn't disobeying any command of Jesus and was simply making practical use of his available time. I'm of the persuasion that it is almost never wrong to go fishing – sometimes the timing may be unfortunate and clearly, the stories that are told after often fall within the parameters of "bold-faced lies." Remember, the disciples went to Galilee because Jesus had told them to (**Mt 28:7, 10**). Only the attitude of Peter's heart could determine if he were wrong to go back to fishing or not and John fails to record that because Peter's attitude is not the purpose of this story.

The spiritual principle presented in **vs3** is a sad picture of attempting to serve Jesus in the energy of the flesh and the exhausting consequence of accomplishing nothing. The point of this story is not disobedience; it's to teach us what happens when we try to accomplish spiritual things by our own strength direction. If that seems like a stretch just remember that, in the Gospels, fishing symbolizes evangelism (**Lk 5:1-10**). This occurred at the beginning of Jesus' ministry and from that time on, in the vocabulary of Jesus and the disciples, "fish" referred to "men and women" and "fishing" symbolized "evangelism." Here is Peter "fishing" again with similar results. He's unsuccessful until Jesus gives direction. Lesson: our attempts to produce spiritual fruit are worthless unless Jesus directs and blesses them.

**4-6** – There's another important principle in this story. The disciples had fished all night and caught nothing. From personal experience I can tell you that by this time they were discouraged and exhausted and were certainly not thinking about Jesus. They were only thinking of how tired and hungry they were; they were only looking forward to getting a bite to eat and going to bed. But, it was at that moment, when they were least thinking of Jesus that He appeared to them. They weren't looking for Him, but He came to them. If spiritual blessing depended on our seeking out Jesus, there'd be no blessing. We're blessed because Jesus seeks us out, often when we least expect it.

Jesus then does 3 things to change the situation. 1<sup>st</sup>) He asks a question. The point of the question is to get the disciples to acknowledge their own need and failure. If you've read through much of the Bible, you'll notice that God likes to ask a lot of questions. When Adam and Eve sinned, God hit them with a bunch of leading questions: "Where are you?" ([Gen 3:9](#)), "Who told you that you were naked?" and "Have you eaten from the tree that I commanded you that you should not eat?" ([11](#)). Later He asked Eve, "What is this you have done?" ([14](#)). He asked Cain, "Where is your brother Abel?" ([4:9](#)). Through Nathan, God asked David, "Why have you despised the commandment of the LORD, to do evil in His sight?" ([2 Sam 12:9](#)). God asked Isaiah, "Whom shall I send? And who will go for Us?" ([Isa 6:8](#)). Jesus asked the disciples, "Who do you say I am?" ([Mt 16:15](#)), He asked the mob in the Garden, "Whom are you seeking?" ([Jn 18:4](#)) and asked Mary Magdalene at the tomb "Woman, why are you weeping?" ([Jn 20:15](#)). One of the most arresting questions of Scripture is, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?" ([Acts 9:4](#)) God didn't ask these questions because He didn't know the answers. He wasn't trying to determine if Adam was hiding behind the maple tree or the oak. God asks questions to get us to face the situation.

Thus it is in our text. Jesus comes upon a scene of exhausted discouragement. The disciples are spent and they're not really sitting around trying to figure out how they ever got into this exercise in futility. But that's exactly what Jesus wants them to do – He wants them to face the harsh reality of their own actions. Only when they're sufficiently disgusted with their own results will they be open to receiving instruction or direction from Him. Jesus asks, "Have you caught anything?" You can here the not-so-veiled disgust in their reply, "No." Although they didn't elaborate on their failure, they did have to face it and admit that they were failures. Jesus wasn't trying to rub their faces in it; He just wanted them to recognize their hunger, their need and their failure and turn to Him for relief and resolution.

2<sup>nd</sup>) He gives a command. Why the right side? Because that was the side Jesus directed them to fish from! If He'd have said the left side, the fish would have been there. From a human perspective, the disciples were as close to success as the width of the boat. But, the point is not where the work is done or how it's done. It's whether it's being done under Christ's direction and in obedience to Him or by our own wisdom, from our own initiative and in our own strength. Maybe this speaks to you today. Jesus



has a work for each of us to do and He has a way for each of us to do that work. All He wants is for us to stop and listened to Him and then do what He's asked us to do. We're never far from success when we allow Jesus to give the orders and we're usually closer to success than we realize.

You may say, "But I never hear Him directing me!" That may be true; at least it's true that you fail to recognize His direction. If you are a believer, a child of God, you have the Holy Spirit living within you, guiding you into all truth. You have the Word of God, the Word of truth and you have direct access into the throne room of God. On one hand it may simply be that you have not because you ask not. Then again, it may be that He's directing but you're just not seeing it. Remember, at this point in our text, the disciples haven't recognized Jesus. This is not so much a test of trusting in Jesus, they didn't know it was Him until the fish were caught. This was more of a test of their ability to find God's guidance in small and unsuspected ways – like a stranger calling out fishing instructions from the shore.

3<sup>rd</sup>) He sends blessings. He asks a question then gives a command. Now, in response to their obedience to His command, Jesus sends such a great catch of fish into their net that they are unable to draw the catch into the boat! The fish symbolize individuals won for Christ. In the story in [Luke 5](#), the net was breaking but here, the net stays intact because none of those whom God has called and has given to Jesus will be lost. Those whom God calls to Jesus through our efforts will be held secure by both Jesus and the Father; they will never be lost; no, not even one.

**7** – It is the Lord! - When Jesus first appeared on the shore and called to the disciples, none of them recognized Him. But when they obeyed His instructions and saw the blessing of the great catch of fish, they finally realized this was the Lord. John said it first: then the others also recognized Him at that moment. What was the result? Immediately their discouragement and exhaustion disappeared! They were no doubt shocked by the great catch they were trying unsuccessfully to pull into the boat but the real transformation of attitude and outlook came when they knew Jesus was there, directing, providing – instructing.

What was it that caused them to recognize Jesus? Was it the miracle of the great catch? Was it the strangeness of the circumstances? There was no logical reason for morning fishing to be any better than night fishing. There

was no rational reason for the right side of the boat to be more productive than the left side. No, it was John who first recognized that the stranger on the shore was their Master; the same John who leaned on Jesus' chest at the Last Supper; the same John who stood by the cross while Jesus suffered and died for sin. No, it was love that recognized Jesus and it was love that compelled him to share the good news with the others, "It is the Lord!"

Have you made that same discovery in your own life? This is a discovery that must be made. It's made when you obey Christ's commands. He may seem distant and unreal but that's natural - sin separates us from Him. But if you will obey Him, He will work in your life and you will find Him involved in your life just as surely as the disciples did when they obeyed Him. Do you ask, "But what should I do? What does he command?" If you are a Christian, you must follow His directions. If you are not a Christian, you must turn from your sin and call upon Jesus as your Savior.

It's both wonderful and comforting to see Jesus appear on the shore while the disciples were fishing. In [ch20](#), Jesus appeared to the disciples twice when they were gathered together behind closed doors, in essence, while they were at church. But here we see Jesus appear while they were at work. Earlier, He appeared to Mary Magdalene in the midst of her sorrow and hopelessness, right there at the empty tomb. Luke records how Jesus appeared to the 2 disciples on the road as they traveled back to their home in Emmaus. What this shows us is that Jesus doesn't just want to visit with us at church – He's interested in every aspect of our lives and He wants to be part of every aspect. He is not content to be relegated to church visits only, He desires to display His presence and power in even the common places of our lives and Praise God that He does!

Some disparage Peter for going back to fishing but at least he was willing to do something. He may not have been operating under the Lord's direction or blessing but he also wasn't sitting on the couch "waiting" for the Lord to move. For too many believers today, the greatest enemy they have to face is not the world, the flesh or the devil - it's just inertia! "I'll just sit right here until the Lord drops an effective, vibrant ministry into my lap." That will never happen. "But I don't want to run ahead of His direction!" He's already given us all a general direction: take the Gospel into the world. We must prepare ourselves for this task, engage the thrusters and get busy about our

Father's business. "What if I head in the wrong direction?" A ship with forward motion is easy to turn; without it, it's impossible. 😊