

John 21:19–25 — Follow Thou Me

Peter and John, the Lord's Will for Each, the Corrected Rumour, and the Close of the Gospel

Scripture Reading: John 21:19–25

“This spake he, signifying by what death he should glorify God. And when he had spoken this, he saith unto him, Follow me.

Then Peter, turning about, seeth the disciple whom Jesus loved following; which also leaned on his breast at supper, and said, Lord, which is he that betrayeth thee? Peter seeing him saith to Jesus, Lord, and what shall this man do?

Jesus saith unto him, If I will that he tarry till I come, what is that to thee? Follow thou me.

Then went this saying abroad among the brethren, that that disciple should not die: yet Jesus said not unto him, He shall not die; but, If I will that he tarry till I come, what is that to thee?

This is the disciple which testifieth of these things, and wrote these things: and we know that his testimony is true.

And there are also many other things which Jesus did, the which, if they should be written every one, I suppose that even the world itself could not contain the books that should be written. Amen.”

Peter Turning About: The Question About John

Peter turns around immediately after the Lord says Follow me, and he sees the disciple whom Jesus loved following — and then asks, Lord, and what shall this man do? The question is honest and human. It may have been simple curiosity; it

may have had something of comparison in it; it may have been a loving interest in a fellow disciple. But the Lord's answer addresses all of those possible tones equally: What is that to thee? The Lord's will for John is entirely separate from the Lord's will for Peter. Those two things must not be confused or compared.

The description of John in verse 20 is worth pausing on: the disciple whom Jesus loved following, which also leaned on his breast at supper. John himself writes this of himself. He was the one who had leaned on the Lord's breast at the last supper — it was from that closeness that he had been able to ask, at Peter's signal, which one of them was going to betray the Lord. Closeness to the Lord's heart produces intelligence about the Lord's mind. That easy communion — leaning on his breast, speaking with him freely, following him — those things are bound together. They are a bundle.

Two Characters of Ministry: Peter and John

Peter and John together in these closing verses of the gospel represent two things that characterize the church between the Lord's going and his coming. In Peter: the saints who die while waiting. In John: the saints who abide until he comes — those who live in the continual expectancy of his return. Both are real; both are honoured. Neither is in competition with the other.

Peter's ministry had its special epoch. He was the apostle of the circumcision; his epistles were written to the sojourners of the dispersion, the Jewish believers scattered abroad. At the beginning of Acts, myriads of Jewish believers were saved — true Messianic Jews — and Peter's ministry had its particular place in that. The first twelve chapters of Acts are Peter and Peter, and then from the end of chapter 12 Peter is seldom mentioned, and the subject becomes Paul's missionary labours among the Gentiles. His departure from the narrative is itself significant. The book of Hebrews marks the turning point: Jewish believers were called to go outside the camp, to leave Judaism behind entirely. Peter died, and

this Judaic epoch of ministry passed.

John's ministry is of a different character — one that continues to the end. He lived longer than any other apostle. He wrote his epistles when, as he said, the last hour had come — meaning a new epoch, not a literal sixty minutes. He saw the rise of many antichrists and warned of the final one. His first epistle speaks to the nature of the believer, the seed of God, fidelity to the person of Christ, things that are of permanent application to Christians in any age. His ministry abides, as it were, till the Lord comes.

The Lord's Will: If I Will

The Lord's words in verse 22 — If I will that he tarry till I come — contain a remarkable assertion. It is one of the very few places in the Gospels where the Lord uses the words I will in connection with his prerogative over a soul. The leper said, If thou wilt, thou canst make me clean; and the Lord said, I will. The Lord's prayer in John 17 says, Father, I will that they also whom thou hast given me be with me where I am. And here: If I will. This is an assertion of his sovereign right to determine what his will is for each of his people. My will for Peter is not my will for John. My will for you is my will for you — not derived from what you observe in someone else, not the product of comparison. What is that to thee? Follow thou me.

The exhortation has its own positive application in discouragement. When a fellow believer falls, when some respected Christian stumbles or departs from the truth, the response the Lord gives to the soul is this same word: What is that to thee? Follow thou me. Not dismissiveness toward the fallen one, but a re-direction of the gaze. Hebrews puts it differently: those whose faith follow — not whose person follow. The direction of allegiance must always be the Lord himself, not any human figure, however admired.

The Corrected Rumour: A Warning from the Gospel's Own Close

The saying went out among the brethren that the beloved disciple should not die. It was a deduction from the Lord's words — but a false deduction. The Lord had said nothing of the kind. He said, If I will that he tarry till I come — which is an open conditional, not a statement that he would not die.

This is of more than incidental interest. The gospel closes with the written word correcting the spoken tradition. John writes it down precisely: Jesus said not unto him, He shall not die; but, If I will that he tarry till I come, what is that to thee? The contrast is exact — what the Lord actually said, set over against what went abroad among the brethren. The so-called apostolic tradition — what was passed around verbally from the very earliest days of Christianity, before anything was written — was mistaken from the start. Verse 23 is a warning against placing confidence in what is said to go back to the earliest believers, as distinct from what is written. Catholicism, with its traditions and saints and inherited rumours elevated to doctrine, illustrates what happens when verse 23 is not followed.

His Testimony Is True; and the World Could Not Contain the Books

Verse 24 states it plainly: this is the disciple who testifies of these things and wrote these things, and we know that his testimony is true. The we know here is not a claim to have verified every fact independently. It is a divinely wrought conviction in the soul — the same kind of internal knowing that faith always has. Faith is not the accumulation of personally checked evidence; it is God's work in the soul that produces the settled conviction that the testimony of Scripture is true. That is what John means by we know.

Verse 25 closes the gospel with an assertion of the deity of the Lord Jesus: if everything he did were written down, the world itself could not contain the books. Of any finite creature, the world could contain such a record — it would

be long, perhaps, but containable. Of the Lord Jesus alone it could be said that it could not be contained. This is not hyperbole; it is a confession of his infinite person. Every word John selected for the gospel was selected from an inexhaustible supply, guided by the Spirit of God to present the one testimony that runs through the whole of it: that this is the Son of God.

The gospel ends not with a commission to go somewhere, but with discipleship: Follow thou me. The hope of the Lord's coming: till I come. The written word: wrote these things. And the testimony to the infinite person of the Lord Jesus Christ. These are what we are left with at the close of John's Gospel.

Follow thou me. We know that his testimony is true.