

John 21:20-25 Dispelling Jesus' Alleged Failed Prophecies

Review/Introduction: The third time Jesus appeared to His disciples, it was far from Jerusalem, out in the open, alongside the Sea of Galilee (21:1-19). During this third appearance, Jesus asked Peter three times if he loved Him. **Read 21:15-17.**

Why did Jesus ask Peter the same question *three* times? It likely had something to do with the fact that Peter had denied Jesus three times:

ESV **John 13:37-38** Peter said to him, "... I will lay down my life for you." Jesus answered, "Will you lay down your life for me? Truly, truly, I say to you, the rooster will not crow till you have denied me three times."

Now, during His third appearance, Jesus gave Peter a chance to publically redeem himself, and also three times commissioned Peter to care for His flock. This showed Peter, and everyone else, that Jesus fully accepted Peter and appointed him to a position of usefulness.

Next, Jesus predicted *exactly* how Peter would die (by crucifixion). **Read 21:18.**

John added the insight that Jesus said this to show Peter's death would glorify God. **Read 21:19.**

Jesus didn't reveal how any of the rest of them would die. Why did He predict how *Peter* would die? (*Rhetorical*). Why was it important for Peter to know not only how he would die, but that his death would glorify God (21:15-19)? Earlier, Peter said he would die for Jesus, but instead denied that he even knew Jesus. Since Peter had already denied Jesus three times, he no doubt doubted himself. Jesus' revealed to Peter's information about his death to reassure Peter that he would remain faithful to the end (and not deny Jesus again).

- 1) Peter would be killed specifically because of his faith.
- 2) Peter would not deny Jesus during his horrible execution. It proves it was "lesson learned" by Peter!

Application: Jesus was very frank: the cost of discipleship would be high for Peter. The same may be true of any of us. Following Jesus does not guarantee an easy life and a peaceful death.¹ Concerning becoming a disciple, Jesus warned:

ESV **Luke 14:28** For which of you, desiring to build a tower, does not first sit down and count the cost, whether he has enough to complete it?

What final invitation did Jesus issue to Peter in 21:19? Jesus re-invited Peter to follow him, the same similar issued to the disciples at the beginning of Jesus' ministry three years earlier. It was a fresh commission.

¹ Steven Cole, "Lesson 107: Trusting the Sovereign Lord (John 21:18-25)", Bible.org. Accessed November 5, 2020.

Application: This same command applies to us. We are to live our lives in such a way as to glorify God, just as Peter did even in his death (21:19). One way to glory God is to accept Jesus' invitation to follow Him: yielding our lives to the Lord through daily obedience, seeking His will for how we live our lives.²

Eschatology: Jesus promised to “come” again. What could the disciples have learned about the how soon that might happen from 21:18? They learned that Jesus' coming **1)** would not take place until decades later, since Peter would live to be old, and **2)** that Peter would not live to see it. Peter was their canary in a cage; as long as he was alive, they knew Jesus would not come back that day.

*****What did Peter ask Jesus about John (21:20-23)?** Peter wanted to know John's fate.

Why do you suppose Peter was so curious about John's future and no one else's (21:20-21)?

- 1) Peter and Jesus were walking along, Peter turned around and saw John following them, so he asked out of natural curiosity. The others may have been out of sight.
- 2) Not only were the two of them were close associates, but of all the disciples, they were the closest to Jesus (the inner circle).

How did John describe himself in 21:20? John described himself as **1)** the one whom Jesus loved (*agapao*), **2)** the one closest to Jesus at the last supper, and **3)** the one who asked Jesus who it was who would betray Him. No brag, just fact.

Why would John want to bring out this particular information about himself (21:20)? It helps establish John's credibility as a primary source for this information about Jesus. It might also suggest a motive for Peter's question. They were such close friends that Peter felt comfortable enough to signal John to get him to ask Jesus who the betrayer would be (and, John understood Peter's sign language!).

How did Jesus answer Peter's question (21:22)? What's the essence of His answer? Jesus basically said it was none of Peter's business! Instead, Jesus again told Peter to follow him. The Greek literally reads: “You, me, continue following!” (The “you” is emphatic).

Application: We are to follow God's revealed will and not waste time speculating about things that don't concern us. Our duty is to follow Jesus in the way He has for us. Don't compare God's plan for you to God's plan for someone else.

Example: Everyone is familiar with the famous English Baptist pastor Charles Spurgeon, who died young at only 57 in the 1800s. Charles' father, John Spurgeon was also a pastor, but he ministered in obscurity. He outlived his son and died at 90 in the 1900s. Whether God uses you as a Charles or a John is His business!³

² Ibid.

³ Steven Cole, “Lesson 107: Trusting the Sovereign Lord (John 21:18-25)”, Bible.org. Accessed November 5, 2020.

ESV 1 Corinthians 4:2 ... it is required of stewards that they be found trustworthy.

Look carefully at 21:22. Did Jesus say that John would be alive when Jesus returned? Jesus did *not* say for a fact that John would be alive; He hypothetically said “If it is my will.” We must be careful not to read into Scripture anything it does not actually state.

When Jesus said that He would “come,” to what event did He refer (21:22)? This likely refers to what we call the second coming. The New Testament clearly teaches that Jesus will come back visibly, and in person:

ESV Acts 1:9-11 ... as they were looking on, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. And while they were gazing into heaven as he went, behold, two men stood by them in white robes, “This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.”

ESV 1 Thessalonians 4:16 ... the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first.

ESV 1 John 3:2 ... when he appears we will be like him, because we shall see him as he is.

ESV 1 Timothy 6:14 ... the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ ...

Baptist Faith and Message: “According to His promise, Jesus Christ will return personally and visibly in glory to the earth; the dead will be raised; and Christ will judge all men in righteousness. The unrighteous will be consigned to Hell, the place of everlasting punishment. The righteous in their resurrected and glorified bodies will receive their reward and will dwell forever in Heaven with the Lord.”⁴ (Underlining mine).

What strange rumor about his death did John dispel (21:23)? The rumor was that John, unlike Peter, would not die before Jesus came back.

Look carefully; did Jesus say John would never die, or that John would not die before Jesus came again (21:23)?

Eschatology: Regardless of the nature of the misunderstanding, Scripture does state that those alive at the Second Coming will not taste death:

ESV 1 Corinthians 15:51-52 Behold! I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed.

Why do you suppose John wanted to clear up this misunderstanding for his readers (21:23)? Perhaps John was advanced in age when he wrote this, and wanted to dispel false expectations in the event that he died before Jesus returned. False expectations can lead to hurt faith.

⁴ Article X, Last Things, “Baptist Faith and Message 2000”, bfm.sbc.net. Accessed October 27, 2020.

Application: Especially when it comes to prophecy, we must seek to understand the Bible accurately and not read into it things that are not there. Heretics, skeptics, critics and liberals have had a field day attacking the supposedly failed prophecies of Jesus as relates to the timing of His second coming.

Clarifying Confusion Concerning Christ's "Coming": Many people have misunderstood some of the predictions Jesus made about His coming. This misunderstanding has caused them to conclude that His predictions failed, He was wrong, and thus that He was a false prophet, and of course not God in the flesh. Theological liberals have made much of the supposed failed prophecies of Jesus, especially related to the timing of His return.

The New Testament makes frequent reference to Jesus "coming." However, such references do not always refer to the second coming. Instead, these references sometimes refer to different types of coming different from the second coming. One example of this concerns Jesus coming—not *in person*—but *impersonally*, and not in world-wide judgment, but *in localized judgment* against rebellious Israel.

People rightly conclude that there is only one second coming, not three. Scripture itself never refers to Jesus' return *in person* as the "second coming" (it never uses the words Trinity, rapture, missionary or Bible, either). Rather, it states that He will "appear" a second time:

ESV **Hebrews 9:28** ... Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time ...

In a sense, it might help avoid confusion if we called it the second appearing of Jesus instead of the second coming. When we speak of the second coming, we mean His second coming in person, when he actually appears. Another other type of coming the New Testament speaks of is Jesus' *impersonal* coming in a localized judgment against rebellious Israel. This judgment coming took place in A.D. 70, within the lifetimes of the apostles. Arguably, here are some examples:

ESV **John 14:23** ... If anyone loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him.

This seems to refer not to Jesus' second coming, but rather to a existential, spiritual coming of Jesus to those who obey Him.

ESV **Matthew 16:28** ... there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom.

Critics have pounced on this prediction as evidence that Jesus was a Jewish charlatan who didn't know what He was talking about. Since all those standing there that day are long dead, this clearly refers to something *other* than the second coming. Some think it refers to what happened on the Mount of Transfiguration six days later (**Mt 17:1-8**). Others feel it refers to the A.D. 70 judgment coming against rebellious Israel.

ESV **Matthew 24:1-3** Jesus left the temple and was going away, when his disciples came to point out to him the buildings of the temple. But he answered them, "You see all these, do you not? Truly, I say to you, there will not be left here one stone upon another that will not be thrown down." As he sat on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to him privately, saying, "Tell us, when will these things be, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the close of the age?"

When they asked about His coming, they weren't thinking of what we call the second coming, because at that point they didn't know he was going to leave, much less come back again. Jesus answered by giving signs of His coming in judgment to destroy the temple in Jerusalem and of the close of the Jewish age (not the close of the world). Then He added this time indicator:

ESV **Matthew 24:34** Truly, I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place.

A biblical generation was 40 years. The temple was destroyed within 40 years, in A.D. 70.

Difficulty: How can we tell the difference in the Bible between Jesus' coming in judgment and in person? It is not always easy. One way is to look for time indicators (such as in **Matthew 16:23**, above):

ESV **James 5:8-9** ... the coming of the Lord is at hand ... behold, the Judge is standing at the door.

If you knew a woman was engaged, and asked the date of the big day, and she replied that the wedding is at hand, what would that mean?

If I were expecting you for dinner, and my wife said you were standing at the door, what would I know about how soon before you came into the house?

By no stretch of the imagination is a delay of 2000 years at hand or at the door.

ESV **Revelation 1:1** The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show to his servants the things that must soon take place.

In no sense could a delay of 2000 years be reasonably described as soon. Some try to salvage this by pointing out that the Lord does not count time as we do; that a thousand years with the Lord is as one day. The problem with that explanation is that we are not God, we are human, and this was written to us using language in the normal sense and was meant to be understood. It's not trick.

ESV **Revelation 1:3** Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear, and who keep what is written in it, for the time is near.

Symbolism is common in prophetic revelation, and some wish to make these time statements figurative also. The problem with this approach is that the first three chapters were written to seven specific churches and written as normal epistles. The apocalyptic material does not begin until chapter 4.

ESV **Revelation 3:11** I am coming soon.

Jesus spoke this to the church in Philadelphia as an incentive for them to remain faithful. It had relevance specifically to them. Those Christian are long since dead. The coming to which he referred occurred in their lifetimes.

After all the wildly symbolism of the apocalyptic section of Revelation, it comes back down to earth (so to speak!) and concludes:

ESV **Revelation 22:6** ... the Lord, the God of the spirits of the prophets, has sent his angel to show his servants what must soon take place.

ESV **Revelation 22:7** ... behold, I am coming soon. Blessed is the one who keeps the words of the prophecy of this book.

ESV **Revelation 22:10** Do not seal up the words of the prophecy of this book, for the time is near.

ESV **Revelation 22:12** Behold, I am coming soon, bringing my recompense with me, to repay everyone for what he has done.

ESV **Revelation 22:20** Surely I am coming soon.

Insight: Generally, people either interpret the apocalyptic visions literally the time indicators figuratively, or they interpret the time indicators literally but the visions figuratively.

The Point: Though we might differ on particulars, the main point to be observed is that not every reference to Jesus' coming is a reference to His second coming in person.

******How did John describe what he wrote (21:24)?** He said it was true. He stated this with reference to the whole of the book. Similarly, concerning the fact of Jesus' actual death on the cross, John wrote:

ESV **John 19:35** He who saw it has borne witness—his testimony is true, and he knows that he is telling the truth—that you also may believe.

To whom does “we” refer (21:24)? Perhaps it refers to the corporate witness of all the apostles, such as Peter's witness throughout his life and in his death. Jesus Himself said:

ESV **John 5:31** If I alone bear witness about myself, my testimony is not deemed true.

******How many other things did Jesus do (21:25)?** Jesus did so many things that a complete record would fill the earth! Although this could be taken as a hyperbolic statement, John may well have meant it literally. According to **John 1:3**, Jesus made the entire universe.

ESV **John 1:3** All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made.

If every aspect of how He did that, and of how He now sustains it, were written, the world probably would be too small a library.⁵

•“**Books**” (21:25): From *biblion* (basis for “Bible”), “scroll, paper, or written document.” Books as we now know them had not yet been invented, so “books” is probably not the best translation.

So What?

How was what John wrote in chapter 21 designed to cause an unbelieving Jew to believe in Jesus? John wanted to reassure his readers that both he and Peter were reliable witnesses. Peter proved his sincerity because he was willing to die a horrible death rather than deny Jesus again. John also wanted to dispel a false interpretation concerning Jesus’ coming and John’s death.

Based on the totality of John’s book, who is Jesus? Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, equal with the Father, God in human flesh, who died, and rose again.

ESV **John 1:1** In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.

ESV **John 1:14** And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.

ESV **John 1:18** No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father's side, he has made him known.

ESV **John 5:18** This was why the Jews were seeking all the more to kill him, because ... he was even calling God his own Father, making himself equal with God.

ESV **John 10:33** The Jews answered him, "It is not for a good work that we are going to stone you but for blasphemy, because you, being a man, make yourself God."

Based on John’s book as a whole, what did John want from His readers? He wanted them to believe in Jesus!

ESV **John 3:16** For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.

**** = Ask this question before reading the text. This will engage people’s minds and focus their attention.

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⁵ Carson, *John*, 686.