

JESUS: The Greatest Life of All

STUDY EIGHTEEN

Listening to Jesus beside the Sea

John 21:1–22

We need to listen to Jesus beside the Sea of Galilee. His words echo through the centuries. They're still relevant and they're still true.

—Pastor Charles R. Swindoll

UNTOUCHED by the passage of time, the Sea of Galilee is as lovely as it was in Jesus' day. About eight miles across at its widest point and thirteen miles long, the lake is a glistening blue jewel set against rugged hills to the east and sloping fertile plains to the north.

Many fishermen still harvest the sea's bounty as their ancestors once did. Pulling at the oars of their wooden boats, they glide across the water to their favorite fishing spot. They fling nets into the rising sun's reflection on the water and wait for their morning catch.

Jesus' first disciples were fishermen. Along the northern shore was where Jesus called them to follow Him and become fishers of people (*Mark 1:16–20*). The Sea of Galilee was the geographical hub for Jesus' early ministry. In surrounding cities, He healed the sick, cast out demons, and preached the kingdom of God. He taught the Sermon on the Mount with the sea as His backdrop. He sailed across its waters; and late one stormy night, He walked on its waves.

Jesus' death on the cross stirred up a storm like none the disciples had ever faced. But, just as the furious waves could not pull Jesus under, death's grip could not hold Jesus in the grave. The angel at the tomb told the disciples that Jesus would meet them in Galilee. "You will see him there," said the angel (*Matthew 28:7*). So, they went back to where it all began, back to the Sea of Galilee to meet Jesus.



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PREPARE YOUR HEART

You can meet Jesus right where you are in prayer.

Father, take me back to my first steps in following Jesus. Stir in me the joy of pure, undistracted devotion to Him. Fill my heart with His love for the broken, His grace toward sinners, and His vision for life in Him. In His name, amen.



TURN TO THE SCRIPTURES

The angel's message to the women was specific: "Now go and tell his disciples, *including Peter*, that Jesus is going ahead of you to Galilee" (Mark 16:7 emphasis added). Why single out Peter?

Before Jesus' arrest, Peter had boasted to Jesus, "Even if everyone else deserts you, I never will" (14:29). How those words must have haunted Peter! Not only had he deserted Jesus, he had denied Him three times (14:66–71). After his humiliating failure, Peter must have wondered, *Why would Jesus want to see me?*

But, with arms of grace open wide, Jesus *especially* wanted to see Peter, and in John's account of Jesus' post-resurrection appearance by the Sea of Galilee, we will see why.



Observation: Jesus' Appearance by the Sea of Galilee

Use your skills of observation as you read John's account and answer the questions below. Picture the setting and imagine the events as they unfold. Write down everything you see.

The Miraculous Catch—John 21:1–6

"I'm going fishing," Peter said (John 21:3). Who was with Peter and what happened in *John 21:1–3*? Why do you think Peter wanted to go fishing? What must the men have felt after their long night?



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John 21:1–22

What happened to lift their spirits at dawn's first light, according to *John 21:4–6*?

The Surprise Meeting—John 21:7–14

“It’s the Lord!” John blurted out (John 21:7). What did Peter do, according to *John 21:7–11*? What thoughts might have been racing through his mind? What did he want to prove to Jesus?

What did Jesus do and say in *21:12–14*? What aspects of Jesus’ heart did His act of service demonstrate?



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John 21:1–22

Jesus' Conversation with Peter—John 21:15–17

In the chart below, compare the three interchanges between Jesus and Peter in *John 21:15–17*.

<i>John 21:15</i>	
<i>John 21:16</i>	
<i>John 21:17</i>	

Why do you think Peter felt “hurt” that Jesus asked the question three times?

Jesus' Prophecy about Peter—John 21:18–22

What was Jesus' prophecy about Peter, and how did John explain it in *John 21:18–19*?



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John 21:1–22

Curious about the kind of death John would face, Peter asked, “What about him, Lord?” (John 21:21). How did Jesus reply in *21:20–22*?

Jesus was saying to Peter, “A lot has happened in the last three-and-a-half years. Peter, My plans are for you to shepherd My sheep. Come on. Travel with Me.”
—Pastor Chuck Swindoll



Interpretation: Jesus’ Restoration of Peter

Interpretation looks deeper into the passage to decipher its meaning as John’s readers would have understood it. Although Jesus would have spoken in Aramaic—the common first-century language of the Jews—He communicated subtle inferences that John captured in the Greek text.

The Greek word for “love” in Jesus’ first two questions, “Do you love me more than these?” and “Do you love me?” (John 21:15–16), is *agapao*—the highest form of self-sacrificing love. Jesus was asking Peter to evaluate his heart, saying, “Are you willing to sacrifice everything in your devotion to Me?”

Peter responded twice, “you know I love you,” using *phileo*, the Greek word for familial affection, brotherly love (21:15–16). What did Peter communicate about the level of his love?

This is Peter after his denials, after his bitter weeping. This is Peter in all his vulnerability. This is Peter at his best—unguarded, not trying to impress, not putting his foot in his mouth. —Pastor Chuck Swindoll



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John 21:1–22

In His third question, Jesus' switched to *phileo*, "Do you love me?" (John 21:17), graciously accepting Peter as he was and not asking more than Peter could honestly give.

Notice the similarity between this episode and Peter's denials. In the high priest's courtyard, Peter denied his Lord three times by a fire before witnesses (18:17–18, 25–27). Now, Jesus invited Peter to *declare his love* for Him three times by a fire before witnesses. Why do you think Jesus recreated the scene for Peter?

This was a restorative moment for Peter—and an instructive moment for all disciples who love the Lord but have failed in their commitment. What lesson do you learn?

In the years that followed, the fires of persecution would test Peter's love for Christ. Peter would utter no denials then. Instead, according to tradition, he would be crucified for his faith. What hints did Jesus give in 21:18 regarding the "kind of death [by which Peter] would glorify God" (21:19)?



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John 21:1–22

Did you know that Peter said to his captors that he didn't deserve to die like his Lord, so he requested to be crucified upside down? They stretched out his hands and took him where he didn't want to go. John outlived Peter by two decades, so he knew of Peter's death.

—Pastor Chuck Swindoll



Correlation: Back to the Beginning

This appearance was the “third time Jesus had appeared to his disciples since he had been raised from the dead” (21:14). The first time was on Sunday evening (*John 20:19–23*). The second time was eight days later when Thomas was present (*20:24–29*). For His third appearance, Jesus chose the Sea of Galilee for a reason: *to take His disciples back to the beginning of their relationship with Him.*

What similarities do you see between the disciples' meeting Jesus in *John 21:1–6* and their first encounter in *Luke 5:1–11*?

Jesus even repeated His call, “Follow me” (John 21:19 and 22). What vital lesson was Jesus communicating to His disciples by recreating His first encounter with them?

Jesus was saying, “Remember when I first called you from the boat and you dropped your net and we traveled together? Now, get on the road with Me. Let's go together.”

—Pastor Chuck Swindoll



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Application: Listening to Jesus' Lessons by the Sea

What lessons can we draw from Jesus' time with His disciples beside the sea? First, *when the Lord offers an opportunity to transform futility into fruitfulness, be open to change.* These men were fishing pros, and yet their nets were empty. When Jesus told them to cast their nets on the other side, they caught a boatload of fish. It's not our ability but our obedience to Jesus that causes results.

Despite your best efforts, have you been coming up empty lately? What change might the Lord be leading you to make that requires you to depend on Him and obey Him?

Second, *when He moves you in a new and challenging direction, expect to do some soul-searching.* Peter's failure humbled him and made him *more qualified* to lead the fledgling church, not less. With firsthand experience, he could testify to Christ's redeeming grace and encourage others who had failed. When the Lord takes you in a new direction, don't focus on your past failures but your present devotion.

Has the shame of past failures been holding you back? Search your soul. Do you love the Lord? That's the crucial issue, isn't it? What restoration is He offering? What new direction may He have in store?

Third, *as you follow Christ, don't compare yourself to others.* When Peter shifted the focus to John, Jesus drew Peter's eyes back to Him. "You, me, *follow!*" was what Jesus literally told Peter.



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Have you been comparing yourself to others lately? How can you shift your focus to Jesus and keep your eyes on Him today?

Jesus isn't looking for perfection in His disciples. He is looking for honesty, humility, vulnerability, and most of all, wholehearted love for Him. Like Peter, you can grow through your failures. Jesus has the grace to restore you. He just wants to know if you love Him, and you can let Him know right now.



A FINAL PRAYER

Father, from the depths of my soul, I declare my love for You and for Your Son. I bring myself to You as I am, with a history of failures but with a willingness to receive Your grace and move forward in Your will. I desire to keep my eyes on Jesus and follow Him wherever He may lead. In His name, amen.

