

# The Resurrection and Post-Resurrection Narratives

## Chapter 13: A Prophecy of the Martyrdom of Peter and the Destiny of John

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“Verily, verily, I say unto thee, ‘When thou wast young, thou girdest thyself, and walkedst whither thou wouldest: but when thou shalt be old, thou shalt stretch forth thy hands, and another shall gird thee, and carry thee whither thou wouldest not.’” 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?” (Jn. 21:18-23).

After Peter is restored and re-commissioned, our Lord speaks a direct prophecy unto him regarding the kind of death that he is going to die. This prediction is connected to the preceding statement by the Aramaic double amen translated as “verily, verily;” “truly, truly;” “most assuredly;” or, “most solemnly.” This expression (which occurs in the Old Testament in Num. 5:22; Neh. 8:6; Ps. 41:13; 72:19; 89:52) “often introduces a statement which expresses a conclusion to what has preceded.”<sup>1</sup> The restoration of Peter is accompanied with a great promise that the apostle will indeed be faithful unto death. As we study this prophecy there are a number of things to consider.

(1) This prophecy is designed to show Peter that, through a life of humble service toward Christ, the highest honor that Peter had bragged about will indeed be afforded to him. When Peter was arrogant and careless he had said, “Lord, I am ready to go with You, both to prison and to death” (Lk. 22:33). We know that Peter had not listened to the Savior’s warning, or heeded the imperatives at Gethsemane, but had boldly and carelessly exposed himself to temptation and a fall. Peter had missed a great opportunity to confess Jesus at the crucial hour of temptation. Now that Peter had repented and declared his love of Christ, the Savior assures him that by His own persevering power, by His own grace and love toward Peter, he will be given another opportunity to confess the Redeemer under severe testing. But this time the apostle will prevail and glorify God by his confession unto martyrdom. What once was a boast of the overconfident flesh will become a reality by the Spirit. Peter’s repentance was sincere and Peter will demonstrate his love toward Jesus through life all the way to a painful death as a criminal against Rome. What a heart-touching, beautiful promise! While most people would dread knowing the manner of their death, Peter is shown that he indeed will be a faithful shepherd and faithful in his love toward the Master. This would greatly strengthen Peter’s faith and it would reassure him of the Mediator’s infinite love toward him. “Peter is to know the kind of death he is to die and, knowing this in advance, he will not only go forward joyfully to meet it but will also while his

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<sup>1</sup> Willaim Hendriksen, *The Gospel of John*, 111.

life lasts devote himself most zealously to the flock entrusted to him. Paul was also told in advance ‘how great things he must suffer for my name’s sake,’ Acts 9:16.”<sup>2</sup>

This passage should greatly strengthen our faith, assurance and steadfastness, for it demonstrates that Jesus knows the future history of all believers. He knows how they will live and how they will die. Peter had just told the Savior that He knew all things, that he knew that Peter loved Him. Thus, our Lord tells Peter by this prophecy, “Yes, I do know that you love Me. Here My dear disciple, is a glimpse of that love. Your past lack of obedience will be replaced by a fervent obedience. Your past failure to confess will be replaced by a full and glorious confession.”

This truth ought to be a great comfort to all believers. The resurrected Redeemer who rules as King and serves as our High Priest and protector, both knows and arranges our future. He even says to us “that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose” (Rom. 8:28). There is nothing arbitrary about our lives. We are not left to the whim of “lady luck” or chance. Ultimately, there are no real accidents in our lives. Everything occurs under the watching, loving eyes of Jesus and is arranged by His all powerful hands.

This reality must ever be before our eyes for when bad things occur to us and the storms of life seem like they are going to overwhelm us, we can rest upon this great truth. If we keep this truth in our minds we will not fret, murmur and complain over our troubles or over the troubles of those close to us. “In such days we should lean back on the thought, ‘Christ knows this, and knew it when He called me to be His disciple.’”<sup>3</sup> Instead of worrying or complaining we should think and say, “This also is from the Lord: He foresaw it, and would have prevented it, if it had not been for my good.”<sup>4</sup> Paul says that “we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them” (Eph. 2:10). Christians can look forward to the future because our life has meaning and purpose in Christ. We may plan our way, but He directs our steps.

(2) This prophecy gives specific details about the time and manner of Peter’s death. Our Lord tells Peter that when he was younger he girded his long outer garment himself and had the freedom to walk or go wherever he desired. However, when he is old he will stretch out his hands and be girded or bound by another man and forced to go where he does not want to go. There are a number of things to note regarding this statement.

First, this statement implies that Peter was middle-aged in A. D. 30 when these words were spoken. Jesus contrasts a younger Peter with Peter when he has become old. Since Peter was executed during Nero’s reign sometime around A. D. 64, Peter at this time was perhaps older than the other apostles, but was not yet old.

Second, virtually all commentators see in the stretching out of the hands and the binding by another the manner of Peter’s death. In fact, given what is known of Roman executions at this time, we almost certainly have here a prophecy that Peter would be crucified. The general procedure for crucifixion involved first a stretching forth of the hands and arms on the crossbeam of execution. Then, a Roman soldier would take rope and bind or fasten the arms to this beam. Then, the prisoner was required to carry the crossbeam to the site of execution. “This understanding of the stretching out of the hands makes it quite plain that Jesus predicts to Peter that he will die for him as an old man on the stake of shame. Then is clear also why the mention

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<sup>2</sup> R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. John’s Gospel*, 1428-1429.

<sup>3</sup> J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels: John*, 3:513.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

of being guided by another comes after the spreading out of the hands. Not ‘others,’ but ‘one other will gird him and guide him to a place to which Peter does not want to go.’ This ‘other’ is he among those who carry out the death sentence.”<sup>5</sup> Although some commentators see the stretching out of the hands as only a measure to allow a rope to be tied around the waist so the prisoner could be led to the site without escape, the expression “stretching out of the hands” was used by classical writers to describe execution by crucifixion.<sup>6</sup>

This certainly is how Christian writers from the second century onward have interpreted this passage. Peter’s martyrdom is described by a number of church fathers. Eusebius writes, “‘But Peter seems to have preached in Pontus and Galatia and Bithynia and Cappadocia and Asia, to the Jews of the Dispersion, and at last, having come to Rome, he was crucified head downward, for so he himself had asked to suffer’ (*The Ecclesiastical History* III, i).”<sup>7</sup> Tertullian’s description is consistent with Eusebius: “‘At Rome Nero was the first who stained with blood this rising faith. Then is Peter girt by another when he is made fast to the cross’ (*Antidote for the Scorpion’s Sting* XV). Cf. also Origin, *Against Celsus* II, xlv).”<sup>8</sup>

Third, by way of application, the manner of Peter’s death teaches us a few things. The idea, rather common among liberal theologians and some premillennialists, that the apostles were expecting the second bodily coming during their own lifetime is thoroughly refuted by the text before us. Peter is told in no uncertain terms that he is going to grow old and that he is going to be executed before the second coming of the Lord. There is nothing in our Lord’s statement about looking forward to an immediate victory of an earthly kingdom and the following ease this would entail. Peter and many other disciples would have to look forward to suffering, beating, torture and a violent death. The apostolic church was in for a fierce struggle. The leavening of the earth with the gospel would be accompanied by tribulation and was going to take some time. Although it may be true that Peter and the other disciples *in the beginning* were expecting the Redeemer to usher in the kingdom immediately after the resurrection, they did not receive this idea from Christ. Jesus taught his disciples to live as though He would return at any moment (Mt. 24:44, 46, 50, 51; 25:13), but He taught that His physical return would be delayed for a long time (Mt. 25:19).

This passage teaches us that the world has a strong hatred of the truth of Scripture and is willing to attempt to extirpate that truth by persecuting and even killing God’s messengers. The hatred of the Jews toward Paul expressed by the statement, “Away with such a fellow from the earth, for he is not fit to live” (Ac. 22:22), is the thinking of all those who hate Christ and His people whether pagan Romans, Mohammedans, communists, fascists or modern secular humanists. The witness-bearer may be killed but the light of the gospel continues to shine. The blood of the martyrs was greatly used of God to further His cause in pagan Rome as well as Queen Mary’s England. Dying for Jesus is a great privilege, both biblically and historically. Hamilton writes, “We wonder how weak humanity survived such tragedies; and as we think of all whom the headsman’s axe left widows, and all whom inquisitorial terrors hunted from their homes, and try to estimate that long agony by which a martyr Church has maintained its testimony, we begin to appreciate the awful privilege assigned to Peter and to the myriads who,

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<sup>5</sup> Bornhauser as quoted in George R. Beasley-Murray, *John*, 409.

<sup>6</sup> See *Ibid*, 408.

<sup>7</sup> William Hendriksen, *The Gospel of John*, 490.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid*.

like him, have trod in the Master's bleeding track since that morning when, stretching forth His own pierced hands, Jesus said to the apostle, 'Follow Me.'"<sup>9</sup>

(3) In verse 19 John inserts a parenthetical remark to make sure his audience does not misunderstand the Savior's prediction. "This He spoke, signifying by what death he would glorify God." "The expression 'what death' means 'what kind of death,' and is generally considered to indicate that the preceding verse describes death by crucifixion."<sup>10</sup>

What is interesting and significant about this verse is that it teaches that believers may glorify God by the manner in which they die. This is an important teaching of Scripture that we must exalt and magnify God by both the way we live and the way we die. Paul's earnest expectation and hope was that "Christ will be magnified in my body, whether by life or by death" (Phil. 1:20). Peter even emphasized this teaching when he wrote to churches which were going to be persecuted: "Beloved, do not think it strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened to you; but rejoice to the extent that you partake of Christ's sufferings, that when His glory is revealed, you may be glad with exceeding joy. If you are reproached for the name of Christ, blessed are you, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you. On their part He is blasphemed, but on your part He is glorified. But let none of you suffer as a murderer, a thief, an evil doer, or as a busybody in other people's matters. Yet if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in this matter" (1 Pet. 4:12-16). As Christ glorified God through His suffering and death (see Jn. 12:27-28; 13:31-32; 17:1), believers ought to imitate their Savior by being willing to suffer and die for the sake of the gospel.

John's parenthetical comment teaches us that we must learn to face the way in which we die more seriously. In American culture death is something not to be thought about. Even many Christians look at death as simply the end of any usefulness for the kingdom. But God has used the suffering and death of believers many times to exalt His name and further the cause of the gospel. When the heathen in the Roman Empire saw the patient, peaceful, joyful manner in which Christians suffered and died they often wanted to know about the religion that produced such amazing people. Schaff writes, "...this bloody baptism of the church resulted in the birth of a Christian world.... The long and bloody war of heathen Rome against the church, which is built upon a rock, utterly failed. It began in Rome under Nero, it ended near Rome at Milvian Bridge, under Constantine. Aiming to exterminate, it purified. It called forth the virtues of Christian heroism, and resulted in the consolidation and triumph of the new religion. The philosophy of persecution is best expressed by the terse word of Tertullian, who lived in the midst of them, but did not see the end: 'The blood of the Christians is the seed of the Church.'"<sup>11</sup> What was true of the Roman Empire was also true of England under the terror of the papist Bloody Mary. "It is probable that the patient deaths of our martyred Reformers had more effect on the minds of Englishmen, than all the sermons they preached, and all the books they wrote. One thing, at all events, is certain,--the blood of the English martyrs was the seed of the Church."<sup>12</sup>

There are a number of things that we should do if we want to glorify God by our death. First, we must live as though we could die at any moment and stand before God. A professing Christian who dies as a backslider, hypocrite or apostate obviously does not glorify God in death.

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<sup>9</sup> J. Hamilton, *Works*, 1:304 as quoted in W. Robertson Nicoll, ed., *The Sermon Outline Bible*, 8:326.

<sup>10</sup> J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels: John*, 3:520.

<sup>11</sup> Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, [1910] 1989), 2:32, 34-35.

<sup>12</sup> J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels: John*, 3:512.

That is why people who glorify God by how they live also glorify God by how they die. We do not know the point in time when we will leave behind this world. Many people die suddenly by a heart attack, stroke, aneurysm or car accident. Therefore, it is crucial that we always live in a state of readiness to meet Christ. If you want to glorify God in death, then be watching, praying, serving and obeying now—in the present. The believer must always live in holiness and readiness with an eye on the judgment seat of Christ. Are you prepared to die at this very moment? Are you harboring secret sins that would dishonor the gospel? Have you been leading a life that adorns the gospel and glorifies Christ? If not, then right now is the time to repent and replace your complacency, disobedience and secret sins with obedience and godliness. “The Christian who is found like a sentinel at his post, like a servant with his loins girded and his lamp burning, with a heart packed up and ready to go, the man to whom sudden death, by the common consent of all who knew him, is sudden glory,—this is the man who brings glory to God.”<sup>13</sup>

One of the great errors found among modern American evangelicals is the teaching that the Christian life is one of only financial prosperity, happiness and good times. The biblical teaching that a commitment to Christ and godly living will lead to persecution has been either forgotten or has purposely been ignored. Pastors, elders and mature Christians have a moral obligation to tell new believers that the Christian life does involve trials. Although Christians are not being persecuted in America as they were at Rome; nevertheless, our civil government, culture, schools and media are becoming more and more hostile to consistent Bible-believing Christianity. Further, believers need to be taught the joy and glory of sharing Jesus’ suffering and bearing His reproach. The modern prosperity gospel has no room for bringing glory to God through suffering in the Savior’s name. The Bible, however, teaches that it is a great privilege. “Blessed are you when they revile and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely for my sake. Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you” (Mt. 5:11-12).

Second, we must behave in a Christian manner on our deathbed. Death for the heathen is a very terrifying, agonizing experience. As they stand on the abyss of eternity they do not have the comfort of Christ and consolation of the Holy Spirit. Therefore, their deaths are often accompanied by severe grief, depression, terror and even anger. The famous composer Ludwig von Beethoven is said to have died shaking his fist and cursing God. The believer, however, can glorify God by suffering patiently, without complaint and without fear, depression or anger. The dying Christian can be a great witness to others by enduring suffering and death in a way that demonstrates faith in the all-sufficient death of Christ and exhibits trust in the victory of Jesus’ resurrection. The dying Christian can pray and sing with David, “Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil” (Ps. 23:4).

It should be the great concern of every believer to die in such a way that glorifies God. Matthew Henry notes that our chief end is this: “*to die to the Lord, at the word of the Lord*. We die patiently, submitting to the will of God,—die cheerfully, rejoicing in hope of the glory of God,—and die usefully, witnessing to the truth and goodness of religion and encouraging others, we glorify God in dying.”<sup>14</sup> George Hutcheson notes that a martyr’s death is a great testimony to the truth of the gospel: “The sufferings of saints do contribute to set out the glory of God; the glory of the truth of the word when they are ready to seal it with their blood, and to stand to the defense thereof unto death; the glory of the truth and riches of his promises and of eternal life held out therein when they hazard on the enmity and opposition of all, and on death itself, in the

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid, 3:513.

<sup>14</sup> Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 5:1233.

faith and hope thereof, and do look on eternal life as sufficient to compensate all their losses; and the glory of his excellency and all-sufficiency, when they count all things but vanity and loss that they may please him, and so they proclaim their faith to be richly made up in him; therefore saith he, that by his ‘death he should glorify God.’”<sup>15</sup>

(4) Jesus follows up His prophecy by saying to Peter, “Follow Me” (21:19). This statement in its immediate context first refers to a literal, physical, immediate following. In verse 20 we observe Peter and John walking behind or following Christ. Therefore, Peter *minimally* understood these words as an order to go along with the Redeemer as He walked along the shore. In the broader context these words clearly have a more profound meaning which is, “take up your cross, deny yourself and follow Me as Lord and Savior your entire life—even unto death.” “Here was the final word of grace to the fallen and now recovered disciple. Now that Peter had discovered his weakness, now that he had judged the root from which his failure had proceeded now that he had been fully restored in heart, conscience and commission, the Lord says, ‘Follow me.’”<sup>16</sup> When Peter had attempted to follow the Savior while full of pride and carelessness after Gethsemane, he failed miserably. But now, after learning his lesson, he was ready to follow the Master wherever he would lead him. “Expect to be treated as I have been, and to tread the same bloody path that I have trodden before thee; *for the disciple is not greater than his Lord.*”<sup>17</sup>

From the moment that we are converted to the moment we die we must be followers of Christ. This will involve a turning from sin daily, a dying unto self, humility and a great love toward the Savior. Following Jesus means having faith in His person and work and repentance from what we were before our conversion. The person who follows the Savior must first renounce and then forsake all of his known sins against God. John Stott says that in following the Redeemer the forsaking of sin...“can in no circumstances be bypassed. Repentance and faith belong together. [True faith always leads to genuine repentance.] Moreover, repentance is a definite turn from every thought, word, deed and habit which is known to be wrong. It is not sufficient to feel pangs of remorse or to make some kind of apology to God. Fundamentally, repentance is a matter neither of emotion nor of speech. It is an inward change of mind and attitude towards sin which leads to a change of behavior. There can be no compromise here. There may be sins in our lives which we do not think we ever could renounce; but we must be *willing* to let them go as we cry to God for deliverance from them.”<sup>18</sup>

Throughout our whole lives we must continually believe in Christ’s person and doctrines, follow His example and obey His commands. Jesus must be our God and supreme Lord over our lives throughout our whole lives. This is how we must live if we are going to profess Christ; take the name Christian upon us and assert that we are the Son of God’s followers. Jesus must be more important to us than our own desires and specific sins. That is, even those sins which before our conversion were very precious to us. The idea common today that following the Lord only involves a verbal commitment and a brief prayer without a renunciation of specific sins and habits is a doctrine of demons. The “carnal Christian” heresy which says that a person can own Jesus as Savior but not as Lord is the legacy of antinomian dispensationalism. It explicitly contradicts our Lord’s statement that “except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish” (Lk. 13:3, 5). It contradicts Peter, who said the disciples “believed on the Lord Jesus Christ” (Ac. 11:17) and Paul, who said “that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord” (Phil. 2:11).

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<sup>15</sup> George Hutcheson, *The Gospel of John*, 436.

<sup>16</sup> Arthur Pink, *Exposition of the Gospel of John*, 3:329.

<sup>17</sup> Matthew Henry, *Commentary of the Whole Bible*, 5:1234.

<sup>18</sup> John Stott, *Basic Christianity* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1959), 112.

Have you truly repented of every known sin in your life? Are you harboring secret sins like little idols in your heart? Are you willing to put to death the deeds of the flesh daily and follow Christ? If you are unwilling, then you are not following Jesus. And if you are not following the Savior, then you are not a Christian. Although we are not saved by repentance because only Christ's sacrificial death and sinless life saves us; nevertheless, the person who is saved by Christ will repent as a *fruit* of regeneration and faith. If you have not repented, then do so right now, before it's too late. Our mindset should be that of Paul: "For you were bought at a price; therefore glorify God in your body and in your spirit, which are God's" (1 Cor. 6:20; cf. 7:23).

Interestingly, the words "follow Me" would not only bring to Peter's mind his original call by Jesus on the very same shoreline (Mt. 4:19; Mk. 1:17; Lk. 5:10), but would also once again focus his mind on the Redeemer's prediction after the holy supper. "Simon Peter said to Him, 'Lord where are You going?' Jesus answered him, 'Where I am going you cannot follow Me now, but you shall follow Me afterward'" (Jn. 13:36). With his restoration complete, Peter is again to follow Christ. This teaches us that if we fall, then repent and are restored, we also must put the past behind us and continue to serve the Savior. When Satan says, "Look at what you've done. You are not worthy to follow Jesus," we must look at our Lord's words to Peter. When the Redeemer forgives, He also restores. The command, "follow Me," is a present imperative which means, "keep on following Me." Let us be consistent and continuous in our looking to Christ and following Him.

We must also remember that the Savior who calls us to follow Him even to death if necessary is the One who has already suffered, died and risen again. The resurrected Redeemer is our leader. "Now this single consideration greatly soothes all the bitterness that is in death, when the Son of God presents himself before our eyes with his blessed resurrection, which is our triumph over death."<sup>19</sup> Other religions follow leaders (e.g., Krishna, Buddha, Mohammed, the Rabbis, etc) who have been consumed by death. But our leader is alive, active, omniscient and omnipotent. We have such a great privilege to follow the one living, true God who has assumed a human nature to meet our needs.

## What about John?

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?" (Jn. 21:23).

After Jesus told Peter to follow Him, he began to walk away from the group of disciples gathered around Him. Peter, perhaps not understanding the metaphorical meaning of this command, immediately begins walking by the side of Christ. After a short while, Peter hears footsteps and therefore turns to see who is following them. Seeing "the disciple whom Jesus loved" Peter begins to wonder what will happen to John, his best friend and close companion. Therefore, he said to Jesus, "Lord what about him?" This inquiry has the sense of "what about John, is he also going to die a martyr's death?" Regarding this question, it is likely that it grew out of Peter's curiosity regarding John's end and his love and concern for him. There is no need

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<sup>19</sup> John Calvin, *Commentary on the Gospel According to John*, 2:295.

to see something fleshly or unethical regarding this question. Interestingly, besides the Lord's statement about Peter's end, the only other statement about other apostles' futures had already been made about John and James his brother. "Jesus said to them, 'You [James and John] will indeed drink the cup that I drink, and with the baptism I am baptized with you will be baptized'" (Mk. 10:39). Therefore Peter knew that John would suffer persecution.

Our Lord answers Peter with an admonition. "Jesus said to him, 'If I will that he remain till I come, what is that to you? You follow Me'" (21:22). There are a number of noteworthy things regarding this answer.

First, the statement "If I will" can only be interpreted as teaching that Jesus is Lord and God who has absolute authority, power and control over all events. "Christ died and rose again that He might become the Lord and Master both of the dead and of the living (Rom. 13:9). He speaks here in full consciousness of this sovereignty."<sup>20</sup> "Very obviously, our Lord's words presuppose predestination. It is He who ordains the lives of all men, and He has decreed the lives and deaths of His disciples. His statement is emphatic: 'If I will.' All depends on His sovereign will. Neither Peter nor any other disciple disputes this."<sup>21</sup> In revealing His decree to Peter, Jesus did something very unusual. Peter had not asked for this information, but our Lord gave him this information for his own benefit. However, Peter did not have any business asking Christ to reveal the secret decretive will of God regarding John. Our requests to God must not be made to satisfy curiosity; but, rather, for the sake of personal holiness. "Peter must not be so deeply interested in God's secret counsel (regarding John) that he fails to pay attention to God's revealed will!"<sup>22</sup>

The teaching that God has sovereign control over all events is taught throughout Scripture (Ps. 22:28, 29; 47:9; 103:17-19; Pr. 16:33; Dan. 4:34, 35; Ac. 14:16; Rom. 9:11; 11:5; Eph. 1:4,2; 2 Th. 2:13; 1 Tim. 6:15). But tragically, however, this doctrine is despised, perverted and ignored by most modern churches. Since the nineteenth century more and more professing Christians have replaced the absolute sovereignty of God with the lordship of so-called autonomous man. Behind this teaching is the semi-pelagian idea that God voluntarily restricted His own sovereign power so that men could have a genuine free will. The problem with this doctrine is that God's attributes are unchangeable (immutability) and therefore such an idea is impossible. Also, if salvation is ultimately dependent on an act of man's "autonomous" free will, then salvation is partly of God and partly of man. This teaching turns faith from an *instrument* of salvation that is a gift from God (Eph. 2:8), into a partial ground or foundation of salvation. Thus, most evangelicals are teaching salvation by works, but are completely unaware of it.

Second, the expression "till I come" is a reference to the second coming of Christ. We know that this was the meaning, for the disciples interpreted these words to mean that John would still be alive when Jesus returned. As we shall see in a moment they failed to take into consideration the word "if" (*ean*). Our Lord was not stating a future historical fact about John, but was merely making a *hypothetical* statement in order to admonish Peter.

A number of commentators (e.g., Gill, Lightfoot, Alford, Ellicott, etc) believe that Jesus was not referring to His second bodily coming but rather to a spiritual coming in judgment upon Jerusalem. The problem with this view is that: a) a coming in judgment upon Jerusalem would not be something to look forward to for John who was living in Asia Minor; b) the word "coming" is almost always used of the bodily coming; and, c) although Christians would be

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<sup>20</sup> Alfred Plummer, *The Gospel According to St. John*, 355.

<sup>21</sup> Rousas John Rushdoony, *The Gospel of John* (Vallecito, CA: Ross House Books, 2000), 279.

<sup>22</sup> William Hendriksen, *The Gospel of John*, 491.

greatly excited about a rumor of a literal bodily coming, few Gentile believers in Asia would care much about the destruction of Jerusalem.

Third, Jesus' statement "What is that to you?" has the meaning of "that is not your concern" or "that is none of your business." This statement is followed by a repetition of the injunction, "You follow Me!" Thus, this admonition has a negative and positive element. The negative element is essentially: "Do not concern yourself about things that are beyond your control," or "Don't focus so much on the future of John." The positive aspect is: "Attend to your own holiness and duty. Focus upon your duties as a Christian and Apostle." The great lesson here is "*that whatever we may think about the condition of other people, we should think first about our own.*"<sup>23</sup> Jesus is not saying that we should not concern ourselves about others or take no interest in other believers around us. But, that we must first make sure that our own house is in order, otherwise we will be in no position to minister to others.

Remember, Peter was asking information about events that were to take place *after his death*. These were things about which he had absolutely no role whatsoever to play. Therefore, his question was purely one of curiosity. Taking time to satisfy his own curiosity would profit no one. Further, Peter knew that Christ would take special care of His sheep and His beloved disciple. John would be just fine.

Fourth, by way of application this passage teaches that: a) It is a waste of time to attempt to discover the secret things of God. "The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but those things which are revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may do all the words of this law" (Dt. 29:29). b) We cannot help others spiritually if we do not *first* focus on our own knowledge, obedience and holiness. A dull tool that is not attended to may end up doing more harm than good. When brand new believers are immediately pressed into all sorts of activities and good works, they often do more damage than good. The great intellectual, the apostle Paul, spent three full years in study and training before he went into the mission field. c) There are a number of professing Christians that are so busy with activities and caring for others that they neglect their own spiritual needs. Matthew Henry writes, "He seems more concerned for another than for himself. So apt are we to be busy in other men's matters, but negligent in the concerns of our own souls—quick-sighted abroad, but dim-sighted at home—judging others, and prognosticating what they will do, when we have enough to do to *prove our own work, and understand our own way.*"<sup>24</sup>

## A Parenthetical Comment

After this interaction John inserts a parenthetical comment in order to stop a *misunderstanding* regarding our Lord's statement to Peter that was circulating among the churches in Asia Minor. "Then this saying went out among the brethren that this disciple would not die. Yet, Jesus did not say to him that he would not die; but, 'If I will that he remain till I come, what is that to you?'" (Jn. 21:23). This passage is noteworthy for the following reasons.

First, this statement is very interesting for it shows that the first generation of churches somehow came to believe that John would remain alive until the second coming of Christ and, as a result, John would never see death. In accordance with Paul's teaching in 1 Thess. 4:16-17, ("For the Lord Himself will descend from Heaven with a shout, with the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive and

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<sup>23</sup> J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels: John*, 3:514.

<sup>24</sup> Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 5:1235.

remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And thus we shall always be with the Lord,") these early Christians thought John and those believers who were alive with him would be raptured and go directly to be with Jesus.

Second, note that John does not question their belief in a personal, bodily, coming of Christ. That belief was correct and apostolic. The problem only was in their belief that John would remain and never die. The Redeemer did not say, "*I will* that he remain..." but, "*If I will* that he remain..." The Savior was only making a hypothetical statement about the future "in order to etch indelibly on Peter's mind that the future of the Beloved Disciple was not his concern but that of the risen Lord, and of him alone."<sup>25</sup>

Third, by way of application, this passage shows us three important realities. One is that our Lord's statements are often misunderstood by professing Christians. All believers have a responsibility to carefully study the Bible for themselves using biblical methods of hermeneutics to make sure what they have been taught or what they have read is actually taught in the Scriptures. Errors spread when people simply accept what they have heard without any critical thought or willingness to further study the Bible in order to make sure that what was taught is sound. Luke commended such behavior: "These [the Bereans] were more fair-minded than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word in all readiness, and searched the Scriptures daily to find out whether these things were so" (Ac.17:11). Believers should listen and verify. This completely wrong interpretation spread throughout the whole church because one simple word ("if") was omitted.

When one studies church history, one is astonished at how easily false doctrines were spread throughout various churches. In our own day the Auburn Avenue heresy spread rapidly through two conservative denominations because people were unwilling to question their pastor's teaching and covenant heads did not bother checking to see if the new doctrines were actually taught in Scripture.

This passage also shows us the unreliability of the oral transmission of teachings made in history and the necessity of *written*, divinely-inspired Scripture. Our Lord's statement obviously was told to other disciples, friends and relatives soon after this event. Yet, by the time John wrote his gospel, around thirty-five years later, the statement had already taken on a new meaning never intended by Jesus. It took John himself writing by divine inspiration to dispel this inaccurate rendering of history. Now if a simple statement given directly to seven of the apostles could not be maintained in its purity for even one generation, then what does this incident tell us about the Roman Catholic dogma regarding the *supposed* storehouse of unwritten tradition held by that church? This passage completely obliterates Romanist teaching on the authority of a supposed unwritten tradition. Obviously, the only thing reliable that we can depend on is the inspired writings found only in the Bible (the 66 books that form the canon of Scripture).

Finally, this passage demonstrates how easy human traditions enter the church and spread throughout its ranks. We must never accept an interpretation of Scripture or doctrine simply because it has ancient roots. As we noted earlier, every doctrine must be proven from Scripture alone before it is accepted by the Church. "Nothing is more unsatisfactory, nothing more destitute of solid foundation, than that huge mass of matter which the Roman Catholic Church has heaped together, and professes to respect, called 'Catholic tradition.' The moment a Christian departs from God's Word written, and allows 'Catholic tradition' any authority, he plunges into a jungle of uncertainty, and will be happy if he does not make shipwreck of his faith altogether."<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> George R. Beasley-Murray, *John*, 412.

<sup>26</sup> J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels: John*, 3:526.

To build on human tradition is to build on shifting sand. Roman Catholic tradition has been nothing but a fountain of idolatry, heresy, immorality and blasphemy. The Word of God written is our only sure foundation.

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