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**The Gospel of John**  
**LVII. In Him Is Life**  
**John 21:1-25, John 1:4**

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Reformed pastor John Piper tells of growing up under a father who was a fiery travelling evangelist. He describes the tent meetings, the revivals, during which his father would wring professions of faith out of both sinners and saints alike by means of the powerful stories he would tell. Stories of dramatic conversions, stories of tragic refusals to commit to Christ that would inevitably be followed by an untimely death – too late. But one particular story Piper remembers, one which has had the most impact on him still to this day, was a story his father would tell about a hardened old man who, after so many years of saying no to Jesus, at last come forward to be saved. Piper’s dad, pulling out all the emotional stops, would paint a picture of this old man kneeling before the preacher at the end of the sawdust trail, holding his head in his hands, sobbing and crying out, “*I’ve wasted it! I’ve wasted it! I’ve wasted my life!*”

*This was the story that gripped me more than all the stories of young people who died in car wrecks before they were converted – the story of an old man weeping that he had wasted his life. In those early years God awakened in me a fear and a passion not to waste my life. The thought of coming to my old age and saying through tears, “I’ve wasted it! I’ve wasted it!” was a fearful and horrible thought to me.<sup>1</sup>*

On Easter Sunday Jesus rose from the dead, opening to us the door to eternal life. Because of His victory over death, you and I will now live forever. But Jesus’ resurrection wasn’t just a victory over death – it was and still is also a victory over life. Or, shall we say, a victory over the wasting of life. In other words, Jesus’ resurrection isn’t just about life after we die, it is also about the gift of a new quality of life here and now – in which our living becomes new and good and meaningful.

In John 10, the chapter in which Jesus announced Himself to be our Good Shepherd, He made this point about new life now very clearly: “*I have come that they may have life and have it abundantly.*”<sup>2</sup> This same promise is there in His encounter with the Samaritan woman at the well. The life she was living was broken-down and wasted in about every way imaginable – so much so that she went to that well alone in the heat of the day because the other women didn’t want her anywhere near them when they all went together to the well in the cool hours of the morning. Jesus named her life to her for what it was – wasted; and she had responded by trying to change the topic of conversation rather quickly. But He wouldn’t let her. Instead, He spoke to her about living

water – not from a well, but from out of a heart transformed by the grace of God, resulting in a life overflowing with goodness and purpose and joy. And the transformation in her was immediate. When she ran back to the village, she clearly had already become someone new. The villagers, said John, actually marveled at what she said and how she appeared to them – changed, made new, made . . . alive!<sup>3</sup>

But nowhere is Jesus' victory over wasted life, His resurrection gift to us of new and abundant life, made more clear to us than in our passage this morning. "*In Him was life, and the life was the light of men,*" we read in the opening of John's Gospel.<sup>4</sup> And now, like a matching bookend, here at the end of John's Gospel we close on that very same theme – that in the Resurrection of Jesus Christ we are given not just eternal life someday, but abundant life right here and right now. Peter and several of the other disciples have gone fishing – they were fishermen, after all. They go out at night to cast their nets – but as morning is beginning to dawn, they have not caught a thing. I'd call that a picture, a parable if you will, of life without meaning, life without joy, life in danger of being wasted – this portrait of the disciples having fished all night, working as hard as they can with all the fishermen skill they possess, and yet still coming up empty. This picture of the disciples coming up empty reminds me of one of my favorite Henri Nouwen quotes, one of his most insightful into the way our lives are often much like that picture of the fishermen with their empty nets:

*While our hearts and minds are filled with many things, and we wonder how we can live up to the expectations imposed upon us by ourselves and others, we have a deep sense of unfulfillment. While busy with and worried about many things, we seldom feel truly satisfied, at peace, or at home. A gnawing sense of being unfulfilled underlies our filled lives . . .*<sup>5</sup>

Out all night fishing, and not having caught a single fish. A wasted trip.

And then, out of the dawn's early light, they spy a figure standing on the shore. The figure asks if they have caught anything, and they yell back "no." And then the man says to them, "*Cast your net on the right side of the boat, and you will find some.*" They do so, and suddenly their net is filled nearly to breaking – one hundred and fifty-three fish (of course they would have counted them – they were fishermen, after all). And there it is, the parable fully told. Left to our own devices, living life solely on our own terms or on the terms of the culture around us and, in the end, we come up empty – wasted fishing trip, wasted life. But listening to Jesus, doing what Jesus instructs us to do, living the way Jesus tells us to live – and our lives will become full, fulfilling, one hundred and fifty-three overwhelmingly large catch of fish abundant. Everything we could ever want out of life, and so much more.

Jesus teaches us how to live – and in His instruction lies the way and the truth which lead to abundant life. And if we will listen to His instruction, if we will take our cues on how to live and what to live for from Him instead of from the world around us, if we will just simply try as best as we can to do what He tells us to do – then abundant life will open up before us. Abundant life will begin to enter into us. Abundant life will become our life, here and now and every single day. Because "*in Him was life, and the life was the light of men.*"

Pastor and writer John Ortberg gives us an illustration of this. He tells of his childhood piano teacher, Mrs. Beier. He describes that while other piano teachers in town might have a more relaxed attitude towards things such as practice time and rate of progress, Mrs. Beier did not. He says that, with Mrs. Beier, there was *“none of this Rogerian, non-directive, child-centered molly-coddling. If you were her student, you did what she said . . . We set the metronome at her tempo. We sat in the approved posture, we curved our fingers at the precise angle she specified.”*<sup>6</sup>

But he goes on to say that, nonetheless, obedience to her strict instructions never came out of fear of Mrs. Beier. Rather she instilled such good habits in her students more through inspiration and through the instilling of a certain sort of desire. This is how she did it, he says: at the start of every lesson, Mrs. Beier would have the student sit beside her on the piano bench. And then she would begin the lesson by playing for her student something from Chopin or Mozart or Rachmaninoff. And the music she made would be so glorious, says Ortberg, the sounds she drew from that piano so transporting, that all complaining would vanish – replaced by a deep longing to be able to play like Mrs. Beier, to be able to create beauty from the piano the same way that she could. And Mrs. Beier would then say to her student, *“If you will trust me, if you will put yourself in my hands, if you will do what I tell you to do, one day you’ll be able to do what I do. One day the music will be in you.”*<sup>7</sup> And that, says Ortberg, is precisely what Jesus is saying to us when He bids us to live as He instructs us to live:

*Jesus asks all who would be his followers to receive him as their teacher. He lived in a way that no flesh-and-blood human being had ever done. People who watched him and listened to him were transported to another world.*

*And then he said words they hardly dared to believe: Here’s your chance, he said. If you’ll trust me, if you’ll do what I tell you to do, if you’ll put your life in my hands, then one day you can live as I do. One day the music can be in you.*<sup>8</sup>

Not just eternal life when we die, but abundant life right here and right now – if we will let Jesus be our Teacher. For *“in Him was life and the life was the light of men.”*

But He imparts to us this gift of abundant life not just through His teaching, but also – and primarily so – through our experience of His unconditional love for us. That love so often expressed to us in the form of unmerited grace. A man named Dean Nelson tells of a moment in his youth which first opened to him the true meaning of Jesus’ love for him and grace towards him. He played on his high school’s ice hockey team, and they had just defeated their cross-town rival in a hard-fought contest. After the game, he offered a ride home to the team’s goaltender; and together they climbed into his dad’s station wagon, exhausted but exuberant from the victory. As Nelson drove home, all they could talk about was the game. But this was Minnesota in January, which meant that it was very dark and very cold on their way home. As Nelson eased the car onto the freeway, the two boys continued their excited discussion of the game – until, suddenly, the other boy said, *“Have you noticed that all of the headlights up there are coming toward us?”*

Nelson quickly realized that somehow, in his distracted state, he had managed to get on the freeway going in the wrong direction. He yanked the steering wheel to the right, swerving the car into the unpaved median. The car sank deep into the Minnesota snow and became stuck fast. He and his teammate crawled out through the windows and set off on foot for an exit to call for help. The highway patrol officer who arrived at the scene berated Nelson for his carelessness and kept marveling that Nelson had not been drinking. The tow truck driver did little to hide his displeasure at being called out on a cold night to crawl around in the snow in order to rescue a couple of dumb kids. But, says Nelson, he feared neither of these responses so much as he feared what he anticipated his dad would have to say to him.

Nelson's father pulled up just as the station wagon was being pulled out of the snow and pointed in the right direction. He went up to his son and asked, "*Are you okay?*" Nelson answered yes. "*The car looks okay,*" his dad then said. "*Yes,*" answered Nelson, bracing for the explosion, the goal-tender having wisely moved a distance away. But instead his dad just stood there silently for a while, the two of them watching the tow truck driver work. Nelson, not knowing what else to do, handed the keys to his dad and asked him, "*How am I going to get home?*" His dad handed the keys back to him and said, "*You're driving. You got on the wrong side of the highway. It's not clearly marked. I'm surprised more people haven't done it.*"

They stood there for a few moments longer, and then his dad said, "*See you at the house. I'm glad you're both okay.*" And that was it. He got back in his car and left. Nelson couldn't believe it. He writes: "*I didn't care about the hockey victory anymore. This was a new level of exuberance. In spite of a ditched car, my dad saw something. The value of another chance? A grace moment from his own past? All I could feel was acceptance, love, and gratitude.*" And then he finishes the thought:

*This is how God sees his creation. He likes what he sees. He sees himself in it. And the delight that God takes in his creation draws us back to him. When we experience this kind of love, and know it for what it is, we realize it is sacred.<sup>9</sup>*

And that is what happened for Peter, right after breakfast. Remember it was still early morning – can you imagine what mornings must have been like for Peter ever since he had denied Jesus three times before the rooster crowed? Roosters crow every morning. So every morning since the crucifixion Peter had been forced to remember what he had done. Cock-a-doodle-doo cries the rooster – and so, with each new day, Peter must have breakfasted anew on the guilt and shame of what he had done.

Anyway, after breakfast, Jesus takes Peter aside. Then three times Jesus says to Peter, "*Do you love me?*" – once for each denial. I wonder when Peter began to catch on to what Jesus was doing. Certainly by the third time, because after the third time Peter was visibly grieved to his heart. But each time, three times, Peter had answered Jesus, "*Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.*" Three affirmations to make up for each of the three denials.

But I don't think that is really what is going on in that exchange – Peter making up for those three denials with those three affirmations. I think what is really happening is that three

times Jesus is demonstrating to Peter how much he is loved by Jesus. And how completely he is forgiven by Jesus. Each question – “*Peter, do you love me?*” – is Jesus saying to Peter, “I love you and I will not let your failure come between you and my love for you.” Each question is Jesus reassuring Peter that all is forgiven – that grace shall be the final word spoken even upon that worst moment of Peter’s life. Each question is Jesus saying to Peter, “You are my beloved. And you are forgiven.” It is Peter’s resurrection – a resurrection into new life from out of his failure and guilt. And it is not Peter’s love for Jesus which is the key to that resurrection – it is Jesus’ unbounded, unyielding, all-embracing, never failing love for Peter. Peter is brought back to life, brought into abundant life here and now by that gift of unmerited grace, by that gift of unconditional love.

And so it is with us. Because, brothers and sisters in Christ, when we come to know that we are loved by God like that – loved unconditionally by the very One who knows all our flaws and failings better than we know ourselves – when we come to know that we are loved like that, then, in that moment, our lives really are made new. Not just new but made worth living. Not just made worth living, but made abundant, overflowing, and good.

Put yourself in Peter’s shoes and imagine Jesus sitting across from you, looking you right in the eyes – so deeply and truly and profoundly that it almost hurts to look into His. He knowing everything about you, even the things you most try to hide – as with Peter and the Samaritan woman at the well, knowing all the ways in which you have failed Him, failed others, failed yourself, wasted life. But then hearing Him say to you – telling you, reassuring you – that He loves you in spite of everything. That He loves you more than words could ever convey. That He loves you so much that He is never going to let anything ever stand in the way of your knowing that love, receiving that love, living into that love. That He loves you so deeply that nothing will ever be able to separate you from His love. Imagine Him saying that to you, just as He did to Peter. When we know ourselves to be loved by God like that – well, it changes everything, doesn’t it?

And our lives truly will never be the same once we let ourselves be loved like that – loved by Him like that. Our lives, even on this side of heaven, lived in the light of such love cannot help but be abundant, full, rich and deep. Because in Him, in His love for us, in His teaching to us – there is indeed life, new life, abundant life. “*In Him is life, and the life is the light of men.*”

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<sup>1</sup> John Piper, *Don’t Waste Your Life* (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway Books, 2003), p.12.

<sup>2</sup> John 10:10.

<sup>3</sup> John 4:1-42.

<sup>4</sup> John 1:4.

<sup>5</sup> Henri J. M. Nouwen, *Making All Things New* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1991), pp. 28-29.

<sup>6</sup> John Ortberg, *Love Beyond Reason* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1998), p. 75.

<sup>7</sup> Ortberg, p. 76.

<sup>8</sup> Ortberg, p. 77.

<sup>9</sup> Dean Nelson, *God Hides in Plain Sight* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2009), p. 120.