

John 21:20

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

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?

Analysis

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? After receiving prophecy of his martyrdom, Peter's immediate response is to look at another disciple. **Turning about** (ἐπιστραφεὶς/epistrapheis) suggests physical movement—Peter literally turns to see John following.

The description **the disciple whom Jesus loved** (ὃν ἠγάπα ὁ Ἰησοῦς/hon ēgapa ho Iēsous) is John's characteristic self-reference, using ἀγαπάω (agapaō)—divine, elective love. John never names himself in this Gospel, preferring this tender description. The participle **following** (ἀκολουθοῦντα/akolouthounta) echoes Jesus's command to Peter—both disciples are following, but Peter's attention shifts from Christ to comparison.

John provides identifying details: **which also leaned on his breast at supper** (ὃς καὶ ἀνέπεσεν ἐν τῷ δείπνῳ ἐπὶ τὸ στῆθος αὐτοῦ/hos kai anepesen en tō deipnō epi to stēthos autou). This recalls John 13:23-25, the Last Supper scene where John reclined next to Jesus in the position of intimacy and asked about the betrayer at Peter's prompting. The detail **and said, Lord, which is he that betrayeth thee?** identifies the specific moment, reinforcing that this is the same beloved disciple.

This careful identification serves narrative purpose—John establishes his eyewitness credibility while setting up Peter's coming question about John's fate.

The contrast between the two disciples—Peter facing martyrdom, John's future yet unknown—creates the tension for verses 21-23.

Historical Context

The 'beloved disciple' appears five times in John's Gospel: reclining at Jesus's breast at the Last Supper (13:23), at the cross with Jesus's mother (19:26-27), reaching the tomb first on resurrection morning (20:2-8), recognizing the risen Lord at the Sea of Galilee (21:7), and here. Each appearance emphasizes intimacy with Jesus and reliable witness.

Traditional identification equates the beloved disciple with John son of Zebedee, one of the Twelve, part of Jesus's inner circle with Peter and James. The Gospel's anonymity regarding this disciple creates humility—John points to Jesus, not himself—while the repeated affirmation of Jesus's love establishes authority. Church fathers unanimously identify the beloved disciple as John the apostle and author of this Gospel.

The detail about leaning on Jesus's breast at supper recalls the posture of Roman-style reclining meals where diners lay on their left side, leaving right hand free. The person to Jesus's right would naturally lean back against His chest to speak quietly—a position of intimacy and trust. This physical closeness symbolizes spiritual intimacy, just as Moses's face-to-face encounters with God distinguished his prophetic authority (Deuteronomy 34:10).

Related Passages

John 3:16 — God's love and salvation

Ephesians 2:8 — Salvation by grace through faith

James 2:17 — Faith and works

Hebrews 11:1 — Definition of faith

Study Questions

1. Why do you think Peter's immediate response to prophecy of his own martyrdom was to look at another disciple rather than absorb Christ's words?
2. How does John's self-description as 'the disciple whom Jesus loved' model both humility (not naming himself) and confidence (resting in Christ's love)?
3. What does the contrast between Peter (activist, impulsive) and John (contemplative, intimate) teach about different personality types in following Christ?

Interlinear Text

Ἐπιστραφεὶς δέ ὁ Πέτρος βλέπει τὸν μαθητὴν ὃς
turning about **Then** ^{G3588} **Peter** **seeth** ^{G3588} **the disciple** **which**
G1994 G1161 G4074 G991 G3101 G3739

ἠγάπα ὁ Ἰησοῦς ἀκολουθοῦντα ὃς καὶ ἀνέπεσεν ἐν
loved ^{G3588} **Jesus** **following** **which** **also** **leaned** **at**
G25 G2424 G190 G3739 G2532 G377 G1722

τῷ δείπνῳ ἐπὶ τὸ στήθος αὐτοῦ καὶ εἶπεν Κύριε τίς
^{G3588} **supper** **on** ^{G3588} **breast** **his** **also** **said** **Lord** **which**
G1173 G1909 G4738 G846 G2532 G2036 G2962 G5101

ἐστὶν ὁ παραδιδούς σε
is he ^{G3588} **that betrayeth** **thee**
G2076 G3860 G4571

Additional Cross-References

John 21:7 (Love): Therefore that disciple whom Jesus loved saith unto Peter, It is the Lord. Now when Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he girt his fisher's coat unto him, (for he was naked,) and did cast himself into the sea.

John 20:2 (Love): Then she runneth, and cometh to Simon Peter, and to the other disciple, whom Jesus loved, and saith unto them, They have taken away the Lord out of the sepulchre, and we know not where they have laid him.

John 21:24 (Parallel theme): This is the disciple which testifieth of these things, and wrote these things: and we know that his testimony is true.

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