

John 21:23

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

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?

Analysis

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? John provides crucial editorial correction of a widespread misunderstanding. **Then went this saying abroad among the brethren** (ἐξῆλθεν οὖν οὗτος ὁ λόγος εἰς τοὺς ἀδελφούς/exēlthen oun houtos ho logos eis tous adelphous)—the verb **went abroad** (ἐξῆλθεν/exēlthen) indicates widespread circulation. A rumor spread through early Christian communities based on misunderstanding Jesus's words.

The misinterpretation was **that that disciple should not die** (ὅτι ὁ μαθητὴς ἐκεῖνος οὐκ ἀποθνήσκει/hotī ho mathētēs ekeinos ouk apothnēskei)—believers concluded John would live until Christ's return. This may have caused eschatological confusion: if John must live until the parousia, then Christ's return was expected within John's natural lifetime. As John aged, questions would arise.

John carefully corrects this: **yet Jesus said not unto him, He shall not die** (οὐκ εἶπεν αὐτῷ ὁ Ἰησοῦς ὅτι οὐκ ἀποθνήσκει/ouk eipen autō ho Iēsous hoti ouk apothnēskei). Jesus made no such promise. Instead, John quotes Jesus's actual words precisely: **If I will that he tarry till I come, what is that to thee?** The conditional **If** (ἐάν/ean) was crucial—Jesus spoke hypothetically about His sovereign right, not prophetically about John's certain survival.

This correction demonstrates John's integrity as historian and theologian. He could have left the rumor uncorrected, enhancing his mystique, but instead clarifies precisely what Jesus said versus what people inferred. This models careful biblical interpretation—distinguishing what Scripture actually says from what we think it implies.

Historical Context

By the time John wrote this Gospel (likely AD 90-95), he was indeed very old, perhaps the last surviving apostle. The rumor that he wouldn't die before Christ's return had apparently circulated for decades. As John aged into his 80s or 90s, this rumor may have caused confusion or disappointment—if John can die, does that mean Christ isn't returning soon?

John's clarification served multiple purposes:

1. It corrected biblical misinterpretation, showing Jesus's words were hypothetical, not prophetic promise.
2. It prepared believers for John's eventual death—when he died, it wouldn't contradict Jesus's words.
3. It discouraged date-setting for Christ's return based on human lifespan.
4. It modeled hermeneutical integrity—handle God's Word carefully, don't claim it says more than it does.

The phrase 'the brethren' (τοὺς ἀδελφούς/tous adelphous) shows how early Christians referred to fellow believers—family language expressing spiritual kinship.

This community had suffered together, shared resources, faced persecution—and also sometimes misunderstood Jesus's words together. John's gentle correction within the family teaches that love includes truth-telling, even when correcting cherished traditions.

Church history records that John died peacefully in Ephesus at advanced age, the only apostle not martyred. His long life produced immense fruit: this Gospel, three

epistles, Revelation, decades of pastoral ministry, training of leaders like Polycarp. God's 'If I will' proved to be His will—John did 'tarry' longer than any other apostle, though not literally until the Second Coming.

Related Passages

Romans 10:9 — Confession and belief for salvation

John 3:16 — God's love and salvation

Study Questions

1. How does this passage warn against building theology or expectations on implications rather than explicit biblical statements?
2. Why is John's willingness to correct a rumor that enhanced his own reputation a model of Christian integrity and careful biblical interpretation?
3. What modern Christian rumors or misinterpretations need similar careful correction by examining what Scripture actually says versus what we assume it means?

Interlinear Text

ἐξῆλθεν οὖν ὁ λόγος οὗτος εἰς τοὺς ἀδελφοὺς ὅτι
abroad Then G3588 saying this among G3588 the brethren that
G1831 G3767 G3056 G3778 G1519 G80 G3754

ὁ μαθητὴς ἐκεῖνος οὐκ ἀποθνήσκει· καὶ οὐκ εἶπεν
G3588 disciple that G1565 not He shall yet not said
G3101 G1565 G3756 G599 G2532 G3756 G2036

αὐτὸν ὁ Ἰησοῦς ὅτι οὐκ ἀποθνήσκει· ἀλλ' Ἐὰν αὐτὸν
that he G3588 Jesus that not He shall but If that he
G846 G2424 G3754 G3756 G599 G235 G1437 G846

θέλω μένειν ἔως ἔρχομαι τί πρὸς σέ
I will tarry till I come what is that to thee
G2309 G3306 G2193 G2064 G5101 G4314 G4571

Additional Cross-References

Job 33:13 (Parallel theme): Why dost thou strive against him? for he giveth not account of any of his matters.

Deuteronomy 29:29 (Parallel theme): The secret things belong unto the LORD our God: but those things which are revealed belong unto us and to our children for ever, that we may do all the words of this law.

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