



John 21:24–25

24 This is the disciple who testifies to these things and who wrote them down. We know that his testimony is true. 25 Jesus did many other things as well. If every one of them were written down, I suppose that even the whole world would not have room for the books that would be written.

Reflection

For those of us who aren't particularly artistic, myself included, I think we have a tendency to assume great painters, or musicians, or authors, only momentarily need to engage their freakish natural talents to produce their finest works of art. We might point to the fact that Picasso dropped out of art school after a couple of weeks. Or that Mozart began to display his prodigious talents from the age of three. But on closer inspection more often than not these freakish natural gifts are paired with a perfectionism; painting and re-painting again and again like Monet's haystacks, or painting over the top of a canvas, never being quite happy with the end result, the paint still wet on the exhibition walls. And authors are by no means immune. Roald Dahl,

‘By the time I am nearing the end of a story, the first part will have been reread and altered and corrected at least one hundred and fifty times. I am suspicious of both facility and speed. Good writing is essentially rewriting. I am positive of this.’

And then there’s Ernest Hemmingway, he’s famous for (amongst other things!) waking up before dawn each day, re-reading and re-writing afresh every word written so far in his manuscript. An excerpt from an interview in 1954,

INTERVIEWER: Do you do any rewriting as you read up to the place you left off the day before? Or does that come later, when the whole is finished?

HEMINGWAY: I always rewrite each day up to the point where I stopped. When it is all finished, naturally you go over it. You get another chance to correct and rewrite when someone else types it, and you see it clean in type. The last chance is in the proofs. You're grateful for these different chances.

INTERVIEWER: How much rewriting do you do?

HEMINGWAY: It depends. I rewrote the ending to Farewell to Arms, the last page of it, thirty-nine times before I was satisfied.

INTERVIEWER: Was there some technical problem there? What was it that stumped you?

HEMINGWAY: Getting the words right.

This level of perfectionism, revision, the weighing of every word to get each one just right, ‘What to include? What not to include?’; surely we can expect no less from the apostle John in the writing of his masterpiece. We read as much, in the conclusion to his masterpiece, in today’s passage from John 21:24–25,

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would be written.

John wrote in his old age, with time to reflect on the teachings of Jesus, the growth of the church and very likely the writings of the other apostles. I wonder how many times he wrote and re-wrote his gospel? Certainly, we've enjoyed his mastery, as he wrote, carried along by the Holy Spirit. We've enjoyed the layers in his work, the vivid portraits – John the Baptist, Nicodemus, the Samaritan woman at the well, the invalid of thirty-eight years healed by the Sheep Gate pool, the man born blind and the Pharisees who refused to see, Martha, Pilate and Peter – all so vivid and real as they add their personal testimony about Jesus to John's own. Then there's John's portrait of Jesus, hand-sketched by the 'beloved disciple' himself, set down on

paper for us by Jesus' most intimate companion. We've delighted in John's powerful symbolism: word to flesh, water to wine, the bread of life, light and darkness, the good shepherd and his sheep. His 'I AM' statements, seven of them so cumulatively memorable and powerful: I am the bread of life, the light of the world, the gate, the good shepherd, the way, the truth and the life, and the vine. Then there's John's ground-breaking teaching about the Holy Spirit: comforter, advocate, counsellor, helper and guide who mediates Jesus' presence to us and empowers us to carry on Jesus' ministry on earth. We've enjoyed John's narrative artistry and his dramatic slow-down in chapters 13 – 19, barely 24 hours in the life of Jesus and yet almost half of John's gospel; because these 24 hours are what it is all about. And as we near the

end, a thousand lines can be drawn leading back from John's masterpiece to his purpose in writing, John 20:31,

31 But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.

Austin Phelps writes of watching people in the Royal Gallery at Dresden sitting for hours before a single masterpiece painting. 'Weeks are spent every year in study of that one work of Raphael. Lovers of art cannot enjoy it to the full, till they have made it their own by prolonged communion with its matchless form.' He tells of a conversation with one of the painting's admirers, who said he had spent years looking at the painting and yet found it possi-

ble over and over to ‘discover some new beauty, and a new joy.’ How much more is this true of John’s masterpiece? Not oil on canvas, but John’s words engraved by the Holy Spirit onto human hearts – and with them, eternal communion with the risen Lord Jesus; new beauty and new joy the more we consider and return to John’s masterpiece with its matchless form.

John has offered us his eyewitness testimony, as Jesus’ closest companion, the humble disciple ‘whom Jesus loved.’ But he is not alone, his gospel is filled with eyewitnesses drawn from all walks of life. Verse 24, the penultimate verse,

24 This is the disciple who testifies to these things and who wrote them down. We know that his testimony

is true.

This is the disciple who testifies to these things and who wrote them down. Me, John. We, together, all these eyewitnesses that I've paraded before you, know that this testimony is true.

And fittingly, John concludes his gospel with the greatness of Jesus. As his last words underline, there is no limit to the greatness of Jesus Christ. Verse 25,

25 Jesus did many other things as well. If every one of them were written down, I suppose that even the whole world would not have room for the books that would be written.

'In addition to what I've written in my gos-

pel,' John is saying, 'Jesus has done many other things as well. Not only during these few brief years amongst us, but as the Word who was with God from the beginning, through whom all things were made; as the Word who throughout the ages has sustained all things, has held all things into being; and as the everlasting centre of all the redeeming purposes of God. Jesus is literally infinite, which means that no conceivable library in earth or in heaven can adequately or fully tell the story of Jesus Christ.'

Think & Pray

Cast your mind back across the journey that John has taken us on over the last nine months. What have you learnt? How have you grown? Are you walking more

closely with Jesus than when you began? Perhaps flick through the chapters and relive some of the personalities in all their vibrancy as they've testified about their encounters with Jesus. What personal testimony can you add to theirs? Then turn to Jesus. What have you learnt from his lips by the power of his Holy Spirit as set down for us in John's masterpiece? What new beauties and what new joys have you found in Jesus as you've communed with him these months passed? What are you most anxious to read and re-read in John's work?

Close our time in John's gospel by praying to our Lord. Thank him for Jesus – the way, the truth and the light – our light in darkness, our hope in this world and our joy into all eternity. To him be the glory,

forever and ever. Amen.

