

Notes on John 21

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Another Appearance to the Apostles (in Galilee) — 21:1-25

This section may serve as an epilogue to John's record.

In some ways, 20:30,31 make a fitting conclusion to John's record. So, some people think chap. 21 was written after the other material, some claim it is an afterthought that John added later, and others even question its genuineness. However, the language is such that it surely was written by John, just as the rest of the book was. And there can be no doubt that it is inspired and belongs with the rest of the book, since all copies of the book, no matter how old they are, include this section. All the evidence indicates that it was with the book from the time it first began to be circulated.

I see no reason to think it is an afterthought or was added after the other material had been written. Lots of writers include material in the nature of an epilogue with their writings, having planned all along to do so. John 1:1-18 serves as a sort of prologue to the book, but no one uses that as a reason to call its veracity into question or to claim it is an afterthought that John did not originally intend to include. So why should we question his intent in writing an epilogue. In any case, the important point is that John wrote it by inspiration, just as he wrote the rest of the book.

Verses 1,2

1. Where did Jesus appear to the disciples next, and who was present? (Think: What is a more common name for this sea?)

Several apostles were together in Galilee.

This passage records still another appearance of Jesus to the apostles. As with the other appearances, John would have been a personal eyewitness to this one. He assures us that this is a true account (v24).

King points out that such repeated appearances to the apostles would be important because they would soon be given the responsibility to preach the gospel throughout the world in the face of great opposition. They knew Jesus had been murdered. They had fled in fear, Peter had even denied Him three times. Even after the resurrection, they had met behind closed doors for fear of the Jews. These men would need overwhelming evidence to convince them to show the courage that would be needed to confront the very authorities who had killed Jesus and fulfill their coming duty to spread the message.

This event occurred at the Sea of Tiberias, another name for the Sea of Galilee. The disciples had returned to Galilee as Jesus had instructed them to do (Matt. 28:7,10,16; Mark 16:7).

Present on this occasion were Peter, Thomas (the one who doubted), Nathanael (see chap. 1), James and John (the sons of Zebedee), and two others who are not named. That makes seven men in all who acted as witnesses to this event. This information serves to confirm that John spoke the truth. Note that the fact the sons of Zebedee are not named is a further indication that John is the author. He names other apostles present but refuses to name himself, just as he has done throughout the book.

Verse 3

2. What were the disciples doing, and what success did they have?

Peter determines to go fishing, and the others accompany him.

The men had apparently returned to their homes. More than a week had passed since Jesus' resurrection (20:26). Perhaps their food supply was running low. They had no particular occu-

pation to keep them busy. They were not traveling with Jesus preaching, as they had been before the crucifixion. Peter, decisive as ever, decided to go fishing, and the others went with him.

The first night out they caught nothing. Night seems to be a preferred time to fish on that sea.

Some claim that this story indicates the apostles had ceased dedicating their lives to Jesus and decided to return to their former lives. This could be, but it is speculation since the Scriptures do not say it. The disciples had seen Jesus, so they presumably believed in His resurrection; Thomas had seen such convincing evidence that he had confessed Jesus to be Lord and God. They may simply have been in need of some means of support until they knew what Jesus wanted them to do. Maybe they did not understand that He had work for them to do. Regardless of their motives, they had clearly returned to their former occupations and needed to be called from it again to do the Lord's work. Peter especially needed reassurance that Jesus still had a plan for him, since he had failed his Lord so miserably.

Verses 4-6

3. Who appeared to them, and what time was it?
4. What did He tell them to do, and what happened?
5. What other similar event had happened previously, and where is it recorded?
(Think: What connection is there between these events?)

Jesus instructs them how to find fish.

In the morning Jesus appeared to them, but they did not recognize Him. Being morning, the light might be weak, perhaps the sea was even misty or foggy. They were some one hundred yards away from Him (v8). And doubtless they were not expecting to see Him there.

He asked if they had any food, and they said they had not. He told them to cast the net on the other side and they would find food. When they obeyed, they caught so many fish they could not draw the net in.

This is exactly what had happened the first time Jesus had called them to be His apostles (Luke 5:1-11). The point could not possibly be coincidence. It is clear that Jesus is in the process of re-commissioning them or calling them again to the work of preaching. They had forsaken Him at His arrest and had been grievously shaken in faith by the following events. They surely realized beyond doubt that they had thoroughly misunderstood His purpose. They needed to be challenged and dedicated again to the work He had for them.

Verse 7

6. Who recognized Jesus, and what did Peter do when he was told? (Think: In what sense was he "naked" - KJV - and why would he do as he did?)

John recognizes Jesus, and Peter leaves to see Him.

John (the disciple whom Jesus loved) recognized the significance of the sequence of events and told Peter that it was the Lord. Peter put on his outer coat and jumped into the water.

This seems to illustrate characteristic qualities of each man. John was perceptive, so he first recognized Jesus. Peter was impetuous, so he immediately took action. Yet they were evidently close friends and were able to work well together in God's service despite (and perhaps because of) their differences.

Other translations say Peter was "naked" (Gk. γυμνος). But the NKJV and other translations (NASB, ASV footnote) show that the idea is not that he was completely unclothed but had removed his outer garment (see Vine; cf. 1 Sam. 19:24; Isaiah 20:2ff; John 13:4; Micah 1:8).

Being the impetuous Peter, when he realized it was Jesus on the shore he did not want to wait for the others. He put on the outer coat and swam and/or waded to Him. The others came in the boat (v8).

Verses 8-11

7. What did the other disciples do, and why did it take them longer to get to land?
8. When they got to shore, what did they see Jesus had done?
9. Describe the contents and condition of the net.

Other disciples bring in the boat and the net full of fish.

The other disciples came to shore in the boat. They were only 300 feet (100 yards) from shore, but they had the heavy net full of fish to drag. By the time they arrived, Peter was apparently already there (v11).

When they arrived, Jesus had already built a fire and put bread and fish on it. He told them to bring some of the fish they had caught, so Peter went and pulled the net to shore. It was full of 153 large fish, yet it had not broken.

There was obviously something miraculous or surely noteworthy about this number of large fish, else why did they count them and why did John record the number? As professional fishermen, they evidently knew how unusual such a catch would be, especially after they had caught nothing all night. But simply by casting on the other side of the boat as Jesus said, they caught a number that was obviously remarkable. The catch was so great they could not bring the net into the boat.

This was intended as a sign. It surely reminded them of the very similar event that occurred the time when Jesus had called them to catch men (Luke 5).

Verses 12-14

10. What did Jesus tell the disciples to do, and why did they not ask who He was?

Jesus invited them to eat with Him.

Jesus invited them to come and eat breakfast. The disciples did not have to ask who He was because they knew. He had not told them who He was, yet even under such unusual circumstances they knew. He gave them bread and fish to eat.

The circumstance of the fish surely reminded them of the time when He had called them to follow Him and become fishers of men. And their close association with Him, often eating meals with Him as they traveled together in His preaching work, left no doubt now who He was. As in other appearances, however, by eating with them He was proving to them that He was truly and physically alive again (cf. Luke 24:40-43). Peter later specifically mentions eating with Jesus as evidence of His resurrection - Acts 10:41.

“Breakfast” (Gk. ἀριστῶ) is translated “break your fast” in some translations. But the idea does not indicate they had been fasting religiously. But they had been out all night without food. This was their first meal of the day and they were hungry (see Vine).

John records that this was Jesus’ third appearance to His disciples after His resurrection.

Clearly this means the third time He appeared to a group consisting primarily of the eleven apostles, those who would be His special witnesses. Specifically, it was the third time Jesus had appeared to the group John was part of. He obviously is not counting the appearances to Mary and the other women, etc. The previous two times were recorded in John 20:19-23 and 20:24-29.

Verses 15-17

11. What question did Jesus ask Peter, and how did Peter answer? (Think: Footnotes in some translations show that Jesus and Peter used two different words for “love.” What is the distinction in these words?)
12. What did Jesus tell Peter to do? (Think: What did this mean? Does it prove Peter was the first Pope as Catholicism claims?)
13. How many times was this exchange repeated?
14. **Special Assignment:** Explain the significance of this exchange. Why would Jesus single out Peter for this discussion? Is there a connection to Peter’s denials? If so, what? Was Jesus condemning Peter, exalting him, or restoring him to service?

Jesus asks Peter if he loves Him, and challenges him to feed His sheep.

This conversation is an interesting study. There is a distinct play on Greek words here, which is not obvious in the English, but some translations add footnotes to make the distinction.

The first two times Jesus asked Peter if He loved (αγαπω) Him, and Peter replied that he loved (φιλεω) Him. The third time Jesus asked Peter if he loved (φιλεω) Him, and Peter replied that Jesus knew he loved (φιλεω) Him because Jesus knows all things. Each time, Jesus told Peter to feed or tend His sheep or lambs.

Notes on the words for “love”:

Gk. αγαπω is the form of love God has toward all men and which He commands His children to have for Him, for one another, and for all other people, including their enemies. It is not an emotional love based on natural attraction to the loveliness of the one loved. Rather it emphasizes the **choice** of the one who loves. It is an attitude of good-will and concern for the needs and well-being of the one loved. It is a willful choice, not a natural emotional response (Matt. 5:43-48).

We naturally feel affection and a desire to help people who attract us by their delightful character or who do nice things for us. We deem them admirable and worthy of our concern. But that is not αγαπω. Instead, αγαπω is a concern for the welfare of those who may have no natural attraction to us but may in fact be repulsive. Nevertheless, we choose to be concerned for them. Such love is also to be shown for those who may at times seem admirable to us, yet doing what is loving may be difficult and unnatural. See Matt. 22:39 for a good illustration.

This love is a motivating quality that leads to action. It is a desire to do what is helpful or useful for another. One who has this love will therefore **act** on it when action is needed by the object of the love. One who does not so act, does not truly have this love (1 John 4:10; 5:3; etc.).

Greek φιλεω, however, is love from a natural attraction and affection. It may involve concern and a desire to help, but the reason for this desire is natural attraction rather than choice. In short, the cause of φιλεω lies in the one loved, whereas the cause of αγαπω lies in the one who loves. One has φιλεω because the object of the love is so attractive or appealing that we naturally appreciate his character and good qualities so we respond kindly. One has αγαπω because the lover chooses to seek the well-being of the one loved, regardless of whether or not he acts in a way that is attractive or pleasing.

The compelling desire to **act** for the good of the one loved is not emphasized in φιλεω as much as in αγαπω. φιλεω involves an admiration and respect so we may enjoy someone’s company, whereas αγαπω involves a responsibility whereby we recognize duties we must fulfill.

Notes on other words:

“Feed” (Gk. βοσκω) refers to providing nourishment as a herdsman does for his flock (Matt. 8:30,33; Mark 5:11,14; Luke 8:32,34; 15:15; see Vine).

“Tend” (Gk. ποιμαίνω) means to act as a shepherd (Luke 17:7; 1 Cor. 9:7; Matt. 2:6), and is the word elsewhere used for elders (1 Peter 5:2; Acts 20:28; Jude 12). It is a more inclusive word than βοσκω. It includes not just providing nourishment but also providing oversight, discipline, guidance (see Vine). (See also Rev. 2:27; 12:5; 19:15.)

“Lambs” (Gk. αρνιον) is a diminutive meaning, though this significance is not always present (see Vine).

“Sheep” (Gk. προβατιον) is a diminutive of προβατον (the diminutive showing endearment). It originally meant any small cattle, whether sheep or goats, but in the New Testament is used only for sheep (Matt. 12:11,12; 10:6; 26:31; John 10:1-27; Heb. 13:20; Matt. 25:33; 7:15; 10:16; 9:36; 6:34; Acts 8:32; Rom. 8:36; 1 Peter 2:25. See Vine).

Observations and conclusions

When Jesus had first called the apostles, they were fishing (Luke 5:1-11 and parallels). Now they were again fishing, and apparently very uncertain about what they were to do with their lives. Jesus was here preparing them for the fact that He was about to call them again, rededicate or recommission them to the work He has for them. He still had special work for them, so He called them again as He had at first.

Before giving them the commission, however, He confirmed (both to themselves and to us as we read the record) their attitude of devotion and commitment to Him. This was especially important for Peter, because he had boasted of great things but had terribly fallen by denying Jesus three times. He was probably more disillusioned and shaken by the events of the crucifixion than any of them.

Catholics teach that Jesus spoke to Peter here to make him the chief shepherd or Pope of the church. However nothing here or elsewhere implies any such meaning. All apostles and elders were responsible to “tend the flock” (Acts 20:28; 1 Peter 5:2 — in the latter passage Peter identifies himself as a “fellow-elder”). No passage indicates Peter had more authority than other apostles (Gal. 2:11-14; 2 Cor. 11:5; see notes on Matt. 16:18,19). Peter had denied Jesus three times. So Jesus here addressed Peter and required him to confess Him three times.

“Lovest thou me more than these” — The Greek for “these” is indefinite and could refer to the aspects of fishing (boat, nets, etc.) or to the other disciples. In the first idea, Jesus would be asking whether Peter loved Jesus more than he loved his former occupation. Was he willing to give up that occupation and serve Jesus?

The second idea would ask whether Peter would again claim a deeper devotion to Jesus than the other apostles had. He had once made this claim. Did he still claim it? (John 13:37; Luke 22:31-34; Mark 14:29-31; Matt. 26:33-35)

Either concept fits the context, but I prefer the second. The context seems to allude to Peter’s denials. This explains why Jesus addressed His questions to Peter and why He asked three times (three confessions for three denials). Peter had confidently boasted that he would serve Jesus even when others would not. This had led directly to Jesus’ statement that Peter would deny Him three times. Jesus here questioned whether Peter still claimed greater love than others had, and this led to three confessions. Besides, it seems to demean a noble word to use αγαπω to refer to fishing equipment.

Peter’s responses show he has been cured of his over-confidence. Rather than overstate his devotion to Jesus as he had done previously, he stated a lesser degree of devotion than even Jesus asked. Jesus asked if Peter had the deep commitment of αγαπω, but Peter confessed only the lesser commitment of φιλω: admiration, affection, and a desire for companionship.

He affirmed that the Lord knew what love he had. This shows that Peter had learned that the Lord knew Peter’s heart better than Peter himself did. The last time they had this conversation, Peter had affirmed great dedication but Jesus knew better. This time Peter admitted that the Lord knows best.

Each time Jesus asked the question, He lowered the degree of commitment. First He asked if Peter loved (αγαπαω) Him more than others loved Him. Then He just asked if Peter loved (αγαπαω) Him (no comparison to others). Then he just asked if Peter loved (φιλεω) Him. Peter responded with a lower degree of commitment than Jesus asked for till Jesus finally came down to the level Peter was willing to admit.

The last time Jesus questioned him, Peter was grieved. Jesus was clearly questioning Peter's commitment to Him. This was distressing, especially when repeatedly questioned. But the most distressing point surely was that Peter saw the connection to the previous discussions and to his denial of Jesus. He was grieved when he had denied Jesus, yet now he had to face Jesus and be questioned about it, even in the presence of the others. He had been greatly humbled by what happened. He would not again venture to claim superior devotion, but simply admitted that he admired and respected Jesus.

It might seem that Jesus was being hard on Peter to bring up his past error. But in reality, he was restoring Peter spiritually. Forgiveness requires acknowledging our errors (Luke 17:3,4; 1 John 1:8,10). Had Jesus left the earth without ever bringing this up, Peter would have been plagued throughout his life with the memory of his error and the knowledge that he had never made it right while he had the opportunity before Jesus left the earth. By bringing it up Himself, Jesus brought the matter into the open so it could be forever resolved and Peter could be restored to service, confident that his Lord desired him to serve as a shepherd of His people alongside the other apostles.

Likewise when a Christian sins today, the Lord expects us to bring the matter up to him, not to ignore it – Galatians 6:1; James 5:19,20; Luke 17:3,4; etc. Only in this way can the sinner be restored in his relationship to us and to God. To ignore the matter leaves it unresolved both in our minds and in his. By discussing it, we leave everyone reassured that all is made right and forgiven. But this must be done with sincere concern for the sinner, as Jesus did it here.

“Feed my lambs” implies Jesus was calling Peter again to dedicate himself to the work Jesus had called him to do. Jesus' disciples would need spiritual nourishment and guidance. (“Lambs” or “sheep” may refer to new converts, but seems more likely to be terms of affection for all disciples.) Peter had failed once in the work Jesus gave him. Jesus now called him to go back to work, but reminded him first that he needed the commitment of love to be successful. This was no greater responsibility than the other apostles had. Peter is singled out, not because he would have a greater position, but because he had committed a greater and more obvious sin. He needed to be restored to his position of responsibility along with the other apostles.

Note that Peter affirmed that Jesus knows all things, including what is in the heart. This is a great confession which we should all appreciate. Jesus does know all things, but could only do so if He is God (see notes on 2:24,25). Unless Jesus is Deity, He should have corrected Peter for this.

It is also interesting to compare Peter to Moses and to elders (1 Tim. 3:6). Moses desired a place of leadership in God's service before he was ready for it. He did not see his own impetuosity and weakness (Ex. 2:11-15). He thought he was ready, but God knew he was not. God had to humble him first (Acts 7:25; Ex. 4:1-17). Later, God thought Moses was ready, but Moses was so lowly he did not think he could do it. A similar change appears to have occurred in Peter. This is likewise why elders should not be appointed when they are young and inexperienced.

Verses 18,19

15. What prediction did Jesus make regarding Peter's future, and what was he talking about?
16. What command did He give in v19, and how did it connect to the discussion in the context?

Jesus predicts Peter's death.

Having called Peter to return to work for Him, Jesus predicted the manner of Peter's death. This also connects to the earlier discussion in which Peter had affirmed he would die rather than deny Jesus. Having renewed his call to Peter to work for Him, Jesus here affirmed that Peter would indeed die for Him.

He described how Peter, while young, could clothe himself and go wherever he chose to go. Later (at the time of his death — v19), he would be girded by someone else and would go to places where he did not want to go. Barnes and Clarke say this refers to the common custom of binding men in a yoke and chains on the way to be crucified. Or it could refer to stretching out on the cross and being carried to the place of crucifixion. History says Peter was crucified, but chose to die upside-down because he did not count himself worthy to die upright as his Master had. In any case, John states it refers to Peter's death and the fact he would die as a consequence of his service to Jesus.

Jesus then gave Peter the charge to dedicate himself to His service. "Follow me" (see also v22). This is the same call Jesus had given to the apostles the first time He had called them. He was renewing His call to them to work for Him. (Matt. 4:20,22; 8:22; 16:24; 9:9; Mark 1:18,20; 2:14; Luke 5:11,27,28; 9:59; John 1:43) By following Jesus to work as He worked, they would also follow Him to die as He died (cf. 13:33,36).

Jesus had called on them before to follow Him, but all had instead forsook Him. Peter had even denied Him. Now He calls on them again to follow Him, knowing that persecution and even death await. The disciples, especially Peter, needed to know that great challenges lay ahead. They had failed before. They must not fail again. And without doubt the greater understanding of Jesus' will and of their past failure did motivate them. All remained true to their commission, and Peter in particular faced great opposition as recorded in the book of Acts, yet withstood it all with great courage and conviction.

King points out that John would have written this prediction after it had been fulfilled. John spoke as an eyewitness, having heard the prophecy made. But to recall this must have been very sad for John. He and Peter had been very close, as is shown by the many special events they had shared in Jesus' service. Surely it pained him to remember Jesus' prediction of the death of his close friend and spiritual companion, knowing that it had been fulfilled.

(It is possible, according to v20, that they were physically walking at this time, but surely the parallel passages and the context here show that much more than physical following is meant here by Jesus.)

Verses 20-23

17. What other disciple did Peter ask about, and what question did he ask?
18. What answer did Jesus give? (Think: What might we learn from this?)
19. What rumor started from this, and in what way was it in error? (Think: What can we learn from this?)

Peter asks regarding Jesus' will regarding John

Peter saw John following (the one who had leaned at Jesus' breast at the last supper and asked who would betray Him — 13:25). Peter asked what about that disciple. The context, Jesus' reply, and the interpretation given it (v23) indicate that probably he was asking how John would die. Jesus had said Peter should follow despite facing a violent death, so Peter asked what was

ahead for John. Perhaps this was curiosity or perhaps it was intended to call attention away from Peter for awhile.

Jesus said that the answer to this question was irrelevant to Peter. He should follow Jesus regardless of what happened to John. In fact, if Jesus decided that John would remain till Jesus' return, that would make no difference to Peter.

This shows that we should not be so concerned about other people's service as we sometimes are. We should want others to obey God, but whether they do so or not, we should be faithful. What others do or do not do is no excuse for us. Too often we are so concerned about what other people do, right or wrong, and what will happen to others, good or bad, that we neglect to place the needed emphasis on our own service to God. Jesus corrected that tendency in Peter. He said it was not essential for Peter to know what would happen to John. What should concern Peter was that Peter be faithful. And what should concern me is that I remain faithful.

A mistaken opinion about John's future.

John adds that, as a result of Jesus' saying, some people thought John would never die, however that is not what Jesus said. He said, "**If** I will..." Jesus really said nothing about John's future. He simply reminded Peter that what happened to John should have no effect on what Peter did in Jesus' service. Note that Mormons still claim that Jesus predicted John would never die, despite the clear affirmation of John himself that this is not what Jesus had said. In fact, such speculation is exactly what Jesus was telling Peter not to do! He said to follow Him and not be so concerned about the future of others. But disciples then and Mormons today do it anyway!

Johnson's view is that what Jesus really referred to was the fact that He would come to John on the isle of Patmos and give him the message that John eventually wrote in the book of Revelation. So, instead of dying as martyrs, as the other apostles would, John would tarry long enough to see Jesus come as described in Revelation. History records that John was the only one of the apostles to die a natural death.

King points out that, in any case, Jesus did not satisfy Peter's curiosity about John's future. Like the disciples who thought Jesus said John would never die, many people today have a seemingly unlimited ability to speculate about future events, especially regarding the book of Revelation and about Jesus' second coming. They go on and on with their unfounded opinions about such matters. Jesus' warning to them would be the same as what He gave to Peter: What is important is following Jesus and doing His will now. We do not need to know all the answers to questions about future events, and over-emphasis on such matters can lead us to neglect our present service to God.

This also illustrates the problem of rumors and idle speculation about God's word. It shows the possibility of drawing **unnecessary** inferences from Divine statements. It also shows the importance of respecting Divine conditions. The word "**if**" can completely change the meaning of a statement.

And finally, John's statement shows that Scripture should never be viewed as legend or rumor. On the contrary, it denies and opposes rumor. John makes clear that he is correcting rumor, not spreading it. Those who claim that the New Testament writers were just repeating legends need to deal with passages such as this. In fact, in v24 John makes clear that his record was eyewitness testimony.

Verse 24

20. How does the author identify himself, and what was his reason for writing?

John assures us that he writes firsthand testimony.

As John concludes his record he affirms that he is "that disciple" — i.e., the one mentioned in v23. The author is that disciple whom Jesus loved, who laid on His breast and asked who would betray Him, as in v20. This connects to all the other passages regarding the disciple whom Jesus loved. See introductory notes.

He affirms further that his record is testimony, and his testimony is true. Throughout the book John has emphasized testimony. He is presenting evidence like a witness in a trial. Much of what he has recorded has been personal, firsthand testimony. He was personally present and saw Jesus' trial, death, and appearances after His resurrection, as well as most of His miracles. He was with Jesus throughout most of His ministry.

Contrary to the claims of many critics, the records of Jesus' life and of the early church history are not hearsay, let alone are they legends handed down for generations. On the contrary, most of them are personal, firsthand eyewitness testimony. And what is not firsthand testimony is nevertheless a historical record obtained from those who were eyewitness.

Verse 25

21 How did he describe Jesus' works in v25? (Think: What is the point?)

Finally John concludes by saying Jesus did many other things he did not write about.

If everything Jesus ever did was written down, so many books would result that the world could not hold them. There is much more evidence of who He is and what He did.

However, as John affirmed in 20:30,31, we do not need that additional evidence. Sometimes people claim that we need further revelation or more evidence today because the Bible does not give all we need. The writers, however, said that enough has been written that we can have eternal life. This means there is no need for additional revelation. As long as we have the Bible, we have all we need to be saved and go to heaven.

The Scriptures provide us to all good works (2 Tim. 3:16,17). The Holy Spirit gave the apostles all truth (John 16:13), and they recorded all that pertains to life and godliness (2 Peter 1:3). Nothing more is needed. If the other things Jesus did were written, they would add nothing new that is necessary to salvation. We would just have more examples of the same kind of things and the same teachings repeated.

John did his work and did it well. We can be saved if we believe in Jesus and obey His teachings as recorded in the New Testament. The question for us is what decision we will make. God sent Jesus to live a sinless life and die for us. The Holy Spirit revealed the message and inspired men recorded it. Now the decision is ours.

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