

Avoiding the Side-tracks

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[0 : 00] Will you turn with me now back to John chapter 21. John 21 and we'll read from verse 18. Jesus saying to Peter, truly, truly I say to you, when you were young, you used to dress yourself and walk wherever you wanted, but when you are old, you will stretch out your hands and another will dress you and carry you where you do not want to go.

This he said to show by what kind of death he was to glorify God. And after saying this, he said to him, follow me. Peter turned and saw the disciple whom Jesus loved following them, the one who had been reclining at table close to him and had said, Lord, who is it that is going to betray you? When Peter saw him, he said to Jesus, Lord, what about this man? Jesus said to him, if it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you? You follow me.

It's clear that when you look at reports of traffic accidents, deaths on the road, that driver distraction is a major cause of traffic fatalities.

When you look at the statistics, they may make very solemn and stark reading. The number of people that are distracted by something inside the car, something like texting, eating something, changing the sat-nav or radio channel or CD or whatever.

[1 : 35] These are all features of fatalities on a road and causes of accidents that lead to fatalities. Along with that, you have so many things outside the car that can draw your attention away from focusing on the road.

Especially if you are near the cities where you have adverts, advertising boards, even the scenery itself can draw your mind away.

And of course, sometimes when you are on the motorway especially, if you come across a traffic accident, many people have accidents simply because they want to look at what has happened. And distractions are very much a feature of the Christian life as well.

And very much a feature of what we face as we come day by day to seek to follow Jesus. We very easily get sidetracked, either in a major or minor way.

[2 : 41] And it is the case with Peter, as we saw, that he was sidetracked in different ways from following Jesus. And Jesus more than once pointed out to him things that could very easily take him aside and not follow the Lord as closely or as wholeheartedly as he should.

We saw, in fact, some few studies ago in Luke chapter 22 that the Lord had said to him that Satan had desired to have them, that he might sift them all as wheat, but he had prayed for him.

Satan's design was on the whole body of disciples. He wanted to scatter them. He wanted to cause havoc amongst them, but he had prayed for Peter. And when Peter was recovered, anticipating his denial, which we also saw, then he was to strengthen his brother.

So here again the Lord is drawing Peter to the need to avoid being sidetracked. And that's really the theme of our study this evening. Avoiding the sidetracks, those things that could easily cause us to be sidetracked from following Christ as we should.

And indeed that's Christ's emphasis at the very beginning of Peter's journey as a disciple. We remember our very first study in John 1 where you find Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, bringing him to Jesus.

[4 : 06] And Jesus saying things about him and then saying, follow me. That was his directive right at the outset of his discipleship. Follow me was really the central theme.

And now as he comes to this point, very far on in his discipleship, the Lord is actually having now risen himself from the dead and shortly about to leave this world physically to return to the Father. He's saying again to Peter, Peter, this is the essence of your discipleship. This is really at the very heart of discipleship. Follow me. And that's really how it is for us, isn't it?

The whole of the Christian life is about following Jesus. About following him through whatever circumstances in his lordship he actually brings us to and brings us through. But it's all about following him. It's all about avoiding the distractions. And we do remember this dark power, this satanic power that had his eye and intent and purpose upon Peter.

[5 : 11] And it's the same for you and for me tonight. That dark power that Satan is looks upon the Lord's people, looks upon the worshipping of God's people, looks down and into in a way that you are perhaps and I are perhaps not aware of many times.

Yet that is always his intention. Every single thing that he lays before you by way of temptation, every attempt that he has on your life and on your following of Jesus is with a view to actually getting you away and being sidetracked.

That's what he tried with the Lord himself. He was tempted in the wilderness and the devil came to him these three times that are recorded in Matthew, Mark and Luke.

And the whole purpose of that temptation was to sidetrack Jesus if it were possible. So that he would not go through with the cross with his work of redemption.

And that it would be nullified by coming to give obedience and allegiance to the word of the devil. Avoiding the sidetracks.

[6 : 20] Now this is really pretty much about Peter asking about John. We take it to be the beloved disciple. But even before that, first of all, you have to see how being sidetracked involves very often concerns about the future.

Jesus is here saying to him, Truly I say to you, when you are young you will dress yourself and so on. When you are old you will stretch out your hands. Another will dress you and carry you where you do not want to go.

And he said this, this is John's comment on it. This is what Jesus said, To show by what kind of death he was to glorify God. In other words, Jesus was revealing to Peter beforehand what lay ahead of him.

And indeed how he would end his course of discipleship in this world. Tradition has it, And we are told by some that it is reliable tradition.

Of course it is not scripture. But tradition has it that Peter, And it is a very old tradition, That Peter was actually crucified upside down.

[7 : 24] We can't verify that for sure. But that is a very long standing ancient tradition. And whatever you say of that, It is certainly the case.

What Jesus here predicted, And what Jesus told him about, What Jesus brought him to see would be the case, Is undoubtedly, Jesus revealing to him, That his freedom, His liberty would be curtailed.

Others would take hold of him. And against what he himself would prefer, They would carry him, Where he did not want to go. This was to show what kind of death, By which he was going to glorify God.

It wouldn't be the way that, Peter himself would have chosen it. It very often is like that, With ourselves. It is not very often, It is very often the case rather, That things that happen in our experience, Are not how we would have chosen it.

It is not how we would have set things out. It is not the kind of situation, Or steps that we might ourselves, Have put into the plan of our life, If we had been left to plan it ourselves.

[8 : 27] But we are not the planners, Jesus is. And here he is, Saying to him, You will have this loss of liberty, This is what is going to be, The end of your course in this world, As one of my disciples.

Then, After saying this, He said to him, Follow me. In other words, Peter is saying to him, Jesus is saying to Peter, Despite this, And even in the light of what I am saying, Peter, Your business, Your privilege, Is to follow me.

Not only when this will take place, It is not just saying to Peter, When this actually happens, Peter, When you will be curtailed in your liberty, When people will take hold of you, Whatever that was going to mean.

But all the way through to that, Even now, Peter, As you know this, Don't let it deflect you, From being my disciple, From following me. Don't let it be, In your mind, Something, That sidetracks you, From being, A follower, Closely, Of me.

So significant, That he actually added that, Immediately after saying this, He said to him, Follow me. And that really is, To us also, A reminder that, We have concerns, That could very easily, Distract us, Sideline us, From following Jesus.

[9 : 47] We all have, Concerns about the future, Even, Of course, When it's not been revealed to us, As it is with Peter. Concerns about, Health, About career, About old age, Concerns about death itself, Or, Circumstances of death, And, How we'll cope with certain, Restrictions, And certain limitations, And certain, Events that may, Or may not occur.

Sometimes, Sometimes we, Are taken up by these, In such a way, That we, Find ourselves, Being sidetracked, And our, We lose our focus, And we, Lose our confidence, In Christ himself. And even, Those things, That are impossible, And have not been revealed to us, Especially, Theological points, We can actually have those, As a matter, That will sidetrack us, And prevent us, From actually following, The Lord as fully, As we should, Especially questions, Such as election, Or, Predestination, You know, The kind of thing, I'm talking about, Where people will say, If only I knew, That I was in God's elect, How can I know, That I belong, To God's elect people, Because, I read in the Bible, That God's elect people, Will certainly be saved, And I really would want to know, That I will certainly be saved, Or others, Might even have the view, That well, If I am indeed, Of God's elect people, I know that, That means, I will certainly be saved, Therefore I can relax, Because, Inevitably, I'm going to come, To be saved anyway, And people try, And fit, These sort of things, Predestination, And, Our own will, And all of these things, And see where they tie together, And come into all sorts of,

Theological convulsions, In order to try, And sort out these things, And they really can't be sorted out, In this life, Indeed Spurgeon, One time when he was asked about, This kind of thing, By somebody, He said, I cannot tell you, For the life of me, Whether I am predestined, To go to bed tonight, Or not, But I will tell you, Tomorrow morning, And he went on to say, It reminds me, He says of, A man called, Malachi, A poor man, Malachi, Who lived in Cornwall, A man owed him, Some rent, And he said, Malachi, I owe you five pounds, But I am not going to pay you, Till you tell me, If I am predestined, To pay it, Or said Malachi, You put the money down here, And he did, And Malachi took it, And put it in his pocket, And he said, Yes, You are predestined, To pay me, Now what is the point,

Of all that, The point of all that, As indeed, We are seeing, From this chapter, Here itself is, What is that to you, You follow me, The way to be actually sure, And to know, That you are, In the elect, Of God's people, Is to give your life, To Christ, And when you have given, Your life to Christ, Then you can turn around, And say, Well, I must be amongst, God's people, Because I have willingly, And been made willing, To give my life to Christ, To embrace Christ, To take him, As my saviour, Some of you, May even tonight, Be looking at, What you might call, The house, Or the edifice of salvation, If you can, If you can picture it, As a lovely mansion, And there are many people, That look at that edifice, Or house, Or mansion of salvation, But they are looking in, Through the windows, They are admiring, All those things, That they can see inside, The pardon of God, Forgiveness, Justification, Sanctification,

[13 : 31] Union with Christ, Persevering, All of those things, That you can see, From outside, As you look into the windows, By the aid of scripture, By the aid of the gospel, And you can see, That Christ himself, Is the door, To that building, To that edifice, Of salvation, But what's the good, Of admiring it, From outside, What's the good, Of just standing there, Saying, You know, I wish I really knew, That I belong, To God's people, And until I know it, More certainly, I'll just have to stay, Where I am, And keep looking, In those windows, And admiring those things, Of salvation, And here is Jesus, Saying to you, Don't stand there looking, Just get inside, Go through the door, That Jesus is, Then you can turn around, And admire the things, That you see around you, Within, Inside, That house of salvation, And you can then, Begin to see, More fully, The links,

Between these great doctrines, Of the faith, Please don't stand, Outside, Any longer, Don't think that, Somehow or other, You will be safe, Just because you know, There's such a thing, As election, And predestination, And effectual calling, And God's, Work of grace, In people's hearts, What is that to you?

You follow me, Jesus is saying, And of course, There's a very, Comforting point, In what he's saying here, As well, To Peter, Truly, Truly, I say to you, And we can perhaps, Skip over these words, Too quickly, But really, What that is saying, To Peter is, That the Lord already, Knows his future, And that the future of Peter, Is safe in the hands of Christ, That he is already, Not just aware of these

things, But he is actually, Himself the Lord, Of his future, Just as he is, Of his present, And of his past, And that of course, Really should give us, A huge amount of comfort as well, If we've given, Our life to Christ, That's the most important thing of all, But having done that, Leave the future, With the Lord, As your present too, And your past, Because what this is saying to us is, He knows what your future is,

He's ordained it, He's planned it, He's the one, Who takes care of every aspect of it, And will do so through, To the end of your life, And beyond, So don't be taken up with, That sort of worrying, Matthew chapter 6, Is one of the classic passages, In the Bible about, Worrying or being over anxious, Sufficient for the day, Is its own troubles, Sometimes we, Get sidetracked, By worrying over, What tomorrow might bring, When tomorrow comes, God willing, We understand that actually, There wasn't much cause to worry at all, God's in charge of it, Just as he was of today, So there's our concerns, About the future, Concerns about things, Relating to the future, Concerns about doctrinal issues,

All of these things, Can come together, To sidetrack us, From following Christ, When he had said this, He said to him, Follow me, Secondly, Along with that concern, There are comparisons with others, Peter saw the disciple, Whom Jesus loved following them, And he turned, When Peter saw him, He said to Jesus, Lord, What about this man?

[17 : 34] Jesus said to him, If it is my will, That he remain, Until I come, What is that to you? Now we don't know for sure, Why Peter asked this, About his companion, John, Was he perhaps concerned, Was he perhaps concerned, That John himself, That John himself, That John himself, Might not have to go through, Such things as, The Lord had said to, To Peter, Just shortly before that, As we've seen, Or was there something in Peter, That was just curious, As to, Whether or not, John might have to suffer, A similar ending, To his life, As the Lord had, Specified about Peter himself, We don't know, But he asked us, What about him?

What's going to be, In his life? What about this man? How is his life, Going to develop? How is his life, Going to end? What will be in his lot? And Jesus said, Very tellingly, What is that to you? If it is my will, That he remains, Until I come back, What is that to you? In other words, Having said to Peter, What kind of death, He was going to die, He's now saying, In answer to this query, This question, If it's my will, That this man doesn't die, At all before I come, What is that to you? Even if he's so different to you, As that he will not see death at all, That's actually, Not your business, Your business, Is to follow me, Irrespective of, How your life compares, To his life, Or his, To yours, And, It is important, That we see there, If it is my will, You see, It's the Lord's will, That appoints such things, As the diversity that you see, Within the discipleship, Of the church of Christ, Where, Someone is, So very different, To someone else, In the gifts they have, In the way they carry them out, In their thoughts, In their personalities, In their backgrounds, In the type of service, They give to Christ, And what Jesus is saying to us, Is, I have actually appointed that, This is my will, And if it's my will,

That such and such a person, Be very different, To you, And what I ask you to do, What I require of you, So be it, What is that to you? You follow me, And let's be prepared, Friends, To really accept, The Christ appointed, Diversity, That's within, The church of Christ, I'm not suggesting, By that, That we just accept, Any kinds of teaching, Or divergences, From the truth, What I'm saying is, That there is, Within a very true, Discipleship of Jesus, Such a wide variety, Of distinct gifts, And personalities, And so on, That that is, In fact itself, Something, That really enriches, Our Christian experience, But you see, He's comparing himself, To this man, Or at least asking himself, Asking Jesus about, This man in comparison, To Peter himself, Now there are various things there, That we can mention, And I'm just going to mention, Two or three examples, Very briefly, Of things in this, Particular area, Which might very often,

[20 : 49] Or are very often, A distraction to us, Or perhaps even a means, Of impeding us, Or preventing us, Going further on, In our Christian commitment, Or even to commit our life, To Christ at all, You'll find some people, For example, First example, Will say, Well, I know that such and such a person, Or such and such people, Are far beyond, My level of holiness, Or spirituality, I couldn't possibly, Measure up to them, I don't measure up to them now, I couldn't possibly, Be like they are, I couldn't possibly, Actually, Pray like they pray, Or you might have people saying, Well, Such good people, That I knew, In my parentage, Or my grandparents, I'm far, Far below them, In levels of, Spiritual attainment, Or holiness of life, And they never took communion, So, Why should I have to do that?

Wouldn't it be a dishonoring, To them, And to their reputation, If I were to actually, Who am less than they are, Come and do such a thing, You see, That's the devil's distraction, What is that to you?

You follow me, You do what the Lord says, Is your duty to do, And your privilege to do, And in regard to prayer, Let me say this, Some men particularly, Maybe put off coming, To take communion, Because they assume, That they'll be asked shortly after that, Or some time after that, To engage in public prayer, And that's our practice, That we ask, Men who are communicants, To engage in public prayer, But there's nothing, In scripture, Whatever, As far as I'm aware, That would specify, That every single individual, Who comes, To take communion, Every single man, Who takes communion, Should be expected, To lead a congregation, In prayer, Some people, Don't necessarily have that gift, And that's something, We have to accept, That's not a get out, It's not a way, Of avoiding responsibility,

Or the privilege, Of praying publicly, In the presence of other people, But we should not expect, Absolutely everyone, To be able to do it, And we mustn't actually insist, That that is going to be the case, If it's going to mean, That people, Who don't have that gift, Are not going to take communion, As is their privilege, And their duty to do so, What is that to you?

You follow me, Or you might even find too, On the other hand, Not just those who look to others, That they see it far ahead of them, In holiness and attainment, But also others, Who see faults in Christians, Who follow the Lord, Who see failures, And flaws, And inconsistencies, And who may be afraid, Themselves, To commit themselves, More fully, Or commit themselves at all, To the Lord, And of course, You'll get those, Especially out with the church, Perhaps even within the church as well, And say, Well if that's the case, If they're so far from being perfect, Then the whole of this, Religion thing is just a sham, It's just hypocrisy, That's what the atheist will tell you, That's what the humanist will tell you, That's what the secularist will tell you, It's all just hypocrisy, It's all just a sham, And the sooner we get rid of it, The better, Was Peter a sham?

[24 : 26] Look at this man, Who failed so drastically, As we saw his failure, When we looked at that episode, In his life, The times, He denied his Lord, Was he a failure?

Did Jesus not reinstate him, As we saw last time, In his interview with him, Where he questioned him, Regarding his love, Didn't we see the importance, Of Peter actually saying, Lord, The third time he'd been asked, Lord, You know everything, You know that I love you, In other words, He was saying, Of course I'm not perfect, Of course I have flaws, But what is that to anyone else?

You follow me, Is what Jesus is saying to us, Don't be sidetracked, By seeing inconsistencies in others, That will put yourself, On the sidetrack of non-commitment, Or lesser commitment, Or reluctance to commit yourself, What is that to you?

Everyone will have to stand, By their own life, And by the, The, Things that we have done, As Paul says in 2nd Corinthians, When we come, To appear before the judgment seat of Christ, That each person, May receive, The things they have done, Whether good or bad, I wouldn't answer for your sins, You will answer for my sins, I wouldn't have to, In any way, Give an account of, Of your life, I will only have to give an account of my own, And that's enough, And he's saying, What is that to you?

Let's not be distracted, By measuring ourselves by others, By comparing ourselves with others, By putting ourselves along with others, Whether they're far ahead of us, Or whether we, We think that actually, They're not really surely Christians at all, What is that to you?

[26 : 14] You, Follow, Me, Or you might even find others, Thirdly, That would, Be quite content to be on the periphery, On the outline, On the outside, Or just on the outer edges, If you like, Of the church, And of involvement, In the church, Or involvement in the gospel, And, Would be quite content to actually follow those people too, Now what's the point?

What's the point of remaining on the periphery, On the edge? If Christ is worth following them, Follow him. Don't stay out there, At a distance from where you should be.

Don't let anyone else persuade you, That that's all right. Don't conclude from seeing others doing that, That that's what you should do as well, And that it's better for you to remain on the periphery, Than actually become, More committed to Jesus, And more involved, In the life of the church.

That's what, The evil one, That's what the dark power, Will actually suggest to you. That's the conclusion, He will bring to your mind. That's what the fear of man, Will do to us.

But in fact, Jesus is saying, Well what is that to you? What is it to you? Where anyone else is? Or what anyone else thinks? Or where everyone else is, In regard to commitment to Jesus, You follow

me.

[27 : 51] And then there's something else, Just to conclude with. It's a very important point in itself, Because it says that, The saying spread abroad, It's a rumor really, Among the brothers, That this is Christians, And disciples, That this disciple, Was not going to die.

Yet Jesus did not say to him, That he was not to die, But if it is my will, That he remain till I come, What is that to you? You see, The people that heard this, Misunderstood, Some of them misunderstood, Some of them went away, With the idea, That Jesus had actually said, About John, He's not going to die, He's going to remain, In this world, Until the Lord comes back again. And that rumor spread, Among the disciples, And people believed this, And in believing this, They missed the whole point, Of what Jesus was saying. He didn't say, As John here says, As John confirms, That he would not die, But, If it is my will, That he remain till I come, What is that to you? And that's, That brings up the whole, Issue of, Rumor, And carrying tales, And inaccuracies, Which we don't have time, Really to go into in depth, But because it's in the passage, It's important to notice it, Because that itself, Is very often, A means of sidetracking, People from following Christ, The carrying forward, Of that which is unsubstantiated, That which is untrue, That which is not provable, I was talking to a journalist, The other day, A reputable journalist, There are many disreputable, Ones around, And thankfully, There are many reputable ones too, And we mustn't just, Apply the same, Sort of, Description, To all of the media, To all of, The journalism, That we find in our land, And this reputable journalist, Said to me, You know, He said, If certain people, Who are Christians, And it was Christians, He was talking about, If certain people, Who are Christians, Had to apply,

The same, Careful analysis, And rules, That we do, And that we should be doing, Before we come to report, Anything publicly, They wouldn't actually, Open their mouths so quickly, Or at all, Because he says, We, As journalists, Ought to, As we required, To actually verify, Our sources, And verify the truth, Of what we receive, Who said it, When did they say it, In what circumstances, Was it said, Who told them, And only when you're, Absolutely as convinced, As possible, That it is the truth, Then you go to press, And then you can publish it, Now it's the same, Of course, In the church, The Bible, Elsewhere, Speaks about the danger, And not only the danger, But the wrongness, Of spreading rumors, Spreading things, Which aren't verifiable, Things which are, Not necessarily true at all, Or even if you don't know, That they be true, Or otherwise, Verse Thessalonians, Chapter 5, And verse 13, Speaks about, Idlers,

[30 : 54] People who were just, Wasting their time, Because they were taken up, So much with, Spreading news, Or spreading, Rumors about others, That's what they were, Really concerned with, Gossiping, New Testament, Has frequent, References to gossiping, And how, The church of God, Should avoid gossiping, In other words, If you don't know, The truth or otherwise, Of something, Keep it to yourself, Don't say anything, To anyone about it, And even if it's, Been verified, That doesn't mean, That you need to, Actually publicize it, Or bring it up, Or spread it, But certainly, Where it has not, Been established as true, Where it is a rumor, There's that, There's that, Terrible saying, I've often, Very often heard it in Gaelic, Mas priak hukum, Mas priak vahuma, If it's come to me, As a lie,

Then it's a lie, Leaving me as well, Or if it's a lie, Leaving me, It's because I received it, As a lie, As if it was, Somebody else's blame, If you don't know, Whether or not, It's a lie, Or verified, Or truthful, Don't say it, Don't carry it about, Don't spread it, That has done, Huge damage, To the cause of Christ, And to other human beings, Even out with the church, What he's saying is, Here is a, A misunderstanding, On the part, Even of these disciples, And they had missed the point, Because of it, Of what Jesus, Was saying, So here, Is the Lord, And pressing upon us, This evening, Upon myself, And upon yourselves, Our business, Really primarily, Is to follow Jesus, To follow him, To put him first, So tonight, This is my question, To myself, Where am I tonight?

Am I on the main road, Of following Christ? Or am I on some side track? And that's the question, For you too, Are you on the main road, Of following him?

Or are you on a side track? Have you been side track, By some consideration, Or other, Even if it's not amongst, The ones we looked at tonight? Your comparison, With other people, Your thoughts about the future, Your own limitations, You're content, To be on the sidelines, With others, On the periphery, The failures, Or inconsistencies, Of professing Christians, What is that, To you?

You, Follow me, Let's pray. We give thanks, O Lord our God, For the directness, Of your truth, And for the way, That it challenges us, In regard to our following, Of you.

[34 : 05] We thank you, For the privilege, Of being your disciples, We pray your forgiveness, For our own inconsistencies, For our own flaws, And failures, That are all too evident, And even if they are not, We know them, Lord, Ourselves, In our hearts, We pray that you would, Grant to us, To be less diverted, From fixing our eye upon you, And to be, Constantly, Enabled by your grace, To avoid being sidetracked, From a commitment, To Christ, And from our wholehearted following, Of the Lord, As our God, Receive our worship anew, This evening we pray, Pardoning all our sin, For Jesus' sake, Amen.

Well, we're going to conclude our worship tonight, Singing in Psalm number 17, Psalm number 17, On page 18, The tune is, Franconia, And we're singing verses, 4b, That's the middle of verse 4, From every evil path, Four verses through, To the end of verse 8, From every evil path, By your word I am preserved, My feet have held, To all your ways, From them I have, Not swerved, Through to verse 8, In shadow of your wings, Hide me in times of strife, And as the apple of your eye, Preserve and guard my life.

These verses in conclusion. From every evil path, By your word I present, My feet have held, To all your ways, From them I have not swerved, I call on you, O God, For you will answer me, O turn you near to arms like grit, And hear my earnest dream, It's with your steadfast love, And save with your right hand, All those who flee for help to you, When foes against them stand, In shadow of your wings, I be in times of strife, And as the apple of your eye, We serve and guard my life.

If you allow me to get to the main door, please, after the benediction. Now may the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, The love of God the Father, And the communion of the Holy Spirit, Be your portion now and evermore.

[37 : 39] Amen.