

42. Jesus Reinstates Peter (John 21:1-17)

Warm-Up Question: In two or three sentences, how would you describe your idea of the “perfect vacation?”

Alternative Warm-Up Question: Where do you go to just get away from it all?

Breakfast With Jesus (John 21:1-14)

¹Afterward Jesus appeared again to his disciples, by the Sea of Galilee. It happened this way: ²Simon Peter, Thomas (also known as Didymus), Nathanael from Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two other disciples were together. ³“I’m going out to fish,” Simon Peter told them, and they said, “We’ll go with you.” So they went out and got into the boat, but that night they caught nothing. ⁴Early in the morning, Jesus stood on the shore, but the disciples did not realize that it was Jesus. ⁵He called out to them, “Friends, haven’t you any fish?” “No,” they answered. ⁶He said, “Throw your net on the right side of the boat and you will find some.” When they did, they were unable to haul the net in because of the large number of fish. ⁷Then the disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, “It is the Lord!” As soon as Simon Peter heard him say, “It is the Lord,” he wrapped his outer garment around him (for he had taken it off) and jumped into the water. ⁸The other disciples followed in the boat, towing the net full of fish, for they were not far from shore, about a hundred yards. ⁹When they landed, they saw a fire of burning coals there with fish on it, and some bread. ¹⁰Jesus said to them, “Bring some of the fish you have just caught.” ¹¹So Simon Peter climbed back into the boat and dragged the net ashore. It was full of large fish, 153, but even with so many the net was not torn. ¹²Jesus said to them, “Come and have breakfast.” None of the disciples dared ask him, “Who are you?” They knew it was the Lord. ¹³Jesus came, took the bread and gave it to them, and did the same with the fish. ¹⁴This was now the third time Jesus appeared to his disciples after he was raised from the dead (John 21:1-14).

We have come a long way over these last forty-two studies on the life of Jesus the Messiah as told by the apostle John. I trust that you have learned as much as I have as I have asked the Holy Spirit to illuminate the wonder of the Lord Jesus through the study of this book. John the apostle now comes to the last chapter of his gospel, an epilogue and conclusion concerning Peter’s failure. He doesn’t want to leave us hanging and wondering how it all worked out for Peter, but he gives us an intimate detailed account showing us Peter’s total reconciliation and restoration. In this study, we will glimpse the Lord’s kindness and graciousness, for when He reinstated Peter, it was to his full measure as an apostle. Even after Peter denied Jesus three times, The Lord does not hesitate to welcome him back into the fold with full pardon and a plan for his future. The Lord not only gave Peter a clean start, but He gave Peter the chance to honor Him where he had failed before. This should give hope and encouragement to everyone who knows what it is like to experience failure. I think that includes all of us!

In the previous chapter of the Book of John, chapter twenty, John had pointed to various testimonies of individuals who witnessed that they had seen and talked to the risen Lord. We are told in verse fourteen that the appearance at the Sea of Galilee was the third time that Jesus had

appeared to His disciples collectively. We know that the first time was inside the locked room on the night of the resurrection. This was the night Thomas was not there, but the two Emmaus road disciples, after their encounter with Jesus on the road, walked immediately back and were present that evening to witness Jesus' appearance in their midst (Luke 24:33). The second time was a week later when again He appeared to Thomas and the disciples (John 20:26). It is logical that the appearance by the Sea of Galilee was after the Feast of Unleavened Bread. It is here in this familiar setting that Jesus chose to meet with them a third time.

I have visited the Galilee area several times and it is a very beautiful and peaceful place. The Sea of Galilee is not a big body of water, as one may presume. It is more the size of a lake, approximately twelve miles north to south and about six miles wide. The scripture also refers to it as Lake Gennesaret. The interesting thing about this third meeting with Jesus is that it was pre-arranged. They had already been given an invitation. This made it different from the two previous occasions when the disciples seem to be taken by surprise at Jesus' sudden appearance. The Lord had told them that He would see the disciples in Galilee (Matthew 28:10), so after the second Sunday, with the Feast over, they began the eighty-mile walk north to the Galilee area of Israel.

This was a place full of memories for the disciples; for it was here that He spent many hours in teaching and ministry with them. Today, it is still a great place to go to get away from the stress of travelling and unwind in the solitude of the countryside. We can picture this as a place where Jesus spent time in simple fellowship with His disciples. Imagine Peter's feelings as he anticipated this meeting with Christ. Surely, he must have been struggling with his denial of Christ. He may not have even felt worthy to be in the company of the other disciples. The Lord knew Peter's heart. He made sure that Peter got the invitation! We read in Mark's gospel that he was specifically invited by name. When the angels at the empty tomb appeared to the women after the resurrection, they singled out Peter, saying,

But go, tell his disciples and Peter, 'He is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you'" (Mark 16:7 emphasis mine).

Imagine this journey the disciples made together! What do you think would have been on the minds of the disciples, and especially Peter's mind, as they traveled the eighty miles, a two or three day walk to Galilee to meet with Jesus?

We all fear confrontation. There has to be something wrong if a person enjoys being confronted on a sin or mistake. Confrontation though, can be one of the most loving things that a person can do or have done to them. Peter being told that Jesus would see him in Galilee was a way of telling Peter that he was not over and done with, which I am sure the enemy, Satan, was whispering in his ear. We have all had times when the enemy has brought us face to face with our failures. The enemy of our souls would have us believe that we are not worthy, therefore halting our growth and effectiveness.

Failure: The Avenue of Creativity

One cannot be in full time pastoral ministry for long without coming across individuals who

have been convinced by the enemy of our souls that there is no way forward or that their particular sin is unpardonable before God. The enemy has a way of beating us up when we fail. He is not called “the accuser of the brothers” for nothing (Revelation 12:10). He is a liar and the father of lies. Whenever we hear that accusing voice, we should do the opposite of what he says. When Satan accuses us, it is usually because we have been doing something that is waging war against his kingdom. He doesn’t bother those that are spiritually asleep. However, if he is giving you a hard time, accusing you of your failure, it is because he knows, that if you ever fall forward, you will get up stronger. He wants us to fall backward and to backslide under his condemnation and accusation. Have you ever had someone point the finger at you and tell you that you are finished because of a failure in your life? (Isaiah 58:9)

The enemy knows what will happen when we get up. We will arise having learned something more of God’s grace and something more of our need. Our thankfulness deepens. This is how failure can make us stronger. We have more humility in our souls and more dependence on the Lord. It is how we respond to our failure that will make the difference in where we go from that point. When we fail, we are often tempted to look back just like Lot’s wife who looked back and was turned into a pillar of salt (Genesis 19:26). When the going gets tough, it is a natural thing to look back. We reminisce on how things used to be, but if we are ever tempted to go back, things are never the same as they used to be, for we find that we have changed.

We are never fulfilled spiritually by going backwards. When the children of Israel found the going tough on the way to the Promised Land, they wanted to go back to Egypt, but that was not an option (Numbers 14:1-4). When I felt the Lord speaking to me to leave my very lucrative job in commercial fishing and come follow Him, I left and began cleaning windows for a very thin living. The Lord had me in training for many years before I was in full-time ministry. There were times that I thought about going back to my work as a fisherman, wondering if I had made the right choice. If I had gone back, I do not believe I would be doing the work I am doing today. It was time for me to leave my nets behind.

What do you think would have happened to Peter if he had gone back to his old life as a fisherman? Have you ever returned to a place or situation only to find that things were just not the same?

There is an allure to a person who has experienced living by the sea. It is the tranquility of the sound of the waves washing up the beach, the smell of the water, the beauty of the lake itself, and of course, the smell of the fish at the harbor. It was all too tempting to Peter, and all the old memories came back to him of the good times. Isn’t it interesting that when we are tempted to go back, we never remember the hard times, only the good times?

³“I’m going out to fish,” Simon Peter told them, and they said, “We’ll go with you.” So they went out and got into the boat, but that night they caught nothing (John 21:3).

The trouble with going back is that we often draw others with us, and that is the case with Peter that day, for six others went with him. We all influence others with our lives, some more, some less, but we are all influencers to some degree. It is one thing to sin ourselves, but when we influence others to sin, it is another matter entirely. Going fishing is not sin; it was just a familiar

way of life to them. They returned to what was familiar. When something takes one from doing what the Lord wants, though, it is a slippery slope to serving self rather than the Lord. Jesus said, "No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God" (Luke 9:62). The picture is of a person plowing a field, and while his eyes are fixed on a certain point ahead of him, he can plow a straight line, but if he tries to plow straight by looking behind him, he will not be a fruitful servant. We are to fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith (Hebrews 12:2). We know that Jesus told them to go to Galilee to meet with Him there. He knew that eventually, without His commission, they would return to their old way of life. It is His grace and mercy that meet them there and will not let them cling to the past, but embrace a new ministry.

Why would they fish at night? Some would say that they fished at night so that they could get the fish fresh on the market in the morning, but there is more to it than that. While I was living in Israel in 1978, I spent a week in Tiberias, a city situated on the western shore of the Sea of Galilee. Because of my background as a commercial fisherman in England, I was invited to fish with the local fishermen. After many cups of strong Turkish coffee, I asked them as to why they fished at night. They shared that during the day it is impossible to catch fish because there is no tidal current in the Sea of Galilee, the stillness of the water causes the fresh water lake to be very clear. Their nets are too easily seen by the fish and easily avoided. Most people don't credit fish with intelligence, but it is not true, and fish avoid the kind of purse nets they were using. To have a good chance of catching fish, they have to fish at night. John tells us that it was early in the morning that Jesus called to them from the shore asking them in the negative, almost as if He knew that they had no fish. ⁵He called out to them, "Friends, haven't you any fish?" "No," they answered (John 21:5).

Some people say that you can never trust a fisherman to tell the truth. I hope that I have broken that mold! If a fisherman is catching fish, he will never tell you because he doesn't want you to see where he is fishing, fearing that you will be at that spot the next day! If they aren't catching any fish, they won't tell you that either because it is a shame to a fisherman not to catch fish. Today, overfishing and huge nets have seriously depleted fish stocks, but in the days of Jesus there would have been large fish stocks in the Sea of Galilee. Fishermen normally will stretch the truth about the one that got away, but the disciples were honest with Jesus that morning and said that they had no fish. Life can be unfruitful unless the Lord is in the boat.

Even though they did not yet recognize that it was the Lord, when He said to try the right side of the boat, they did so. Immediately, they caught a huge amount of fish, so many that they had difficulty hauling in the net. Instantly, their minds went back to a time some three years earlier when Jesus had instructed them to push out their boat into the deep water and recast their nets even though it was daytime. That time occurred after fishing all night and catching nothing. When they had obeyed the Lord, they caught so many fish that they filled both boats near to sinking! (Luke 5:4-11). The Lord had used that miracle to tell them, that from that day forward they would be catching men, and at that saying they had left all and followed Him.

Now, again, He was demonstrating His authority over nature and giving them a catch that was supernatural. When they saw this miracle repeated in front of their eyes, they knew it was the Lord on the shoreline. John, referring to himself as the disciple that Jesus loved, the son of

Zebedee, was also a fisherman and would probably have been one of the partners with Peter on the earlier occasion recorded in Luke. We can imagine John saying to Peter, “It is the Lord!” and in such a way that implied, “We have both seen this happen before!” What a welcome sight Jesus was, and how wonderful that He would revisit this spot, reminding them of His first encounter with them.

At the words of John, Peter wrapped himself with his outer garment, just as we would put our shirt on. He was probably naked to the waist due to endlessly casting the net into the sea and then pulling it in again. Being a man of action, Peter could not wait for the boat to come to the shore; instead, he dived in and swam to Jesus. After Peter swam to shore and greeted the Lord, he had to go back out to the boat and help the others to pull in the fish (John 21:11). All workers are needed to pull in the net.

Pulling the Nets Together

⁴⁷“Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea and gathered fish of every kind. ⁴⁸When it was full, men drew it ashore and sat down and sorted the good into containers but threw away the bad. ⁴⁹So it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous ⁵⁰and throw them into the fiery furnace. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth (Matthew 13:47-50).

The world is now at a time where we need all hands on deck to pull in the gospel net. Let no one think that he doesn’t have a job. If you know the person of Christ, you have a message others need. As Christians, we are to lend our strength and prayers to those that are actively involved in sharing the gospel. The net of the gospel is composed of many links of string or knots wrapped around one another and pulling together. All are needed. We need the whole church to preach the whole gospel to the whole world. The gospel itself is a net thrown onto the Sea of Galilee of the Gentiles. Soon, there will be a time when the Lord and His angels will come and separate the good from the bad. In other places this time is also spoken of as a time of harvest, where those that have sown their resources with broken hearts and weeping for the lost to be found will see a time when the wheat will be bundled together as sheaves.

Those who go out weeping, carrying seed to sow, will return with songs of joy, carrying sheaves with them (Psalm 126:6).

It is worth noting that, when the disciples came ashore, Jesus already had a charcoal fire burning with fish on it. He then brought out bread for them all to eat with the fish (John 21:13). Just close to that probable location was the same place where He had multiplied the fish and the bread for five thousand people. Now, here he was feeding them again. Just as He had washed their feet, He now fixes breakfast. He really is the Servant King that has come to serve His people, “*the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve*” (Matthew 20:28). I wonder if Peter noticed that it was not a wood fire that Jesus had burning in front of them. You’d think that wood would have been gathered easier, but instead Jesus had made a charcoal fire. When Peter had denied that he even knew Jesus in the courtyard of the high priest, it was beside a charcoal fire. The English New International Version does not bring out the fact that Peter denied the Lord over a charcoal

fire, but most other translations do (John 18:18). He had left the charcoal fire a broken man, but in our passage today, he is restored beside a charcoal fire. This is not the first one-on-one meeting that Peter had with Jesus. We are told in Luke's account that Jesus had already appeared to Simon before this, personally. When the two disciples who had walked and talked with Jesus on the Emmaus road returned to Jerusalem that Sunday night, they found the disciples gathered together, and it was then they were told, "It is true! The Lord has risen and has appeared to Simon" (Luke 24:34). We are not given any details. We do not know what Jesus discussed with Peter. I can only picture Peter weeping at the feet of Jesus.

Did you notice in the passage above (Luke 24:34) that the disciples were using Peter's old name, Simon, not the one that Jesus had given him. In having denied Jesus, Peter may have still felt unworthy to even be called Peter. He needed not only to receive forgiveness but also to forgive himself. Many of us reading these words need to do likewise. Jesus knew Peter would need to be forgiven and restored in the presence of the others if he were to be given responsibility for feeding the flock. Peter had denied Jesus publically, and now he is restored publically.

Peter's Restoration (John 21:15-17)

¹⁵When they had finished eating, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?" "Yes, Lord," he said, "you know that I love you." Jesus said, "Feed my lambs." ¹⁶Again Jesus said, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" He answered, "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you." Jesus said, "Take care of my sheep." ¹⁷The third time he said to him, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" Peter was hurt because Jesus asked him the third time, "Do you love me?" He said, "Lord, you know all things; you know that I love you." Jesus said, "Feed my sheep (John 21:15-17).

Often, when a person has to confront another, the hard part is bringing up the issue that has to be resolved. How did Jesus bring up the issue? The first thing we notice is that the Lord called him by the name by which he grew up, Simon, son of John. The way the Lord addressed him here is contrasted with the title that Jesus had given him, "Peter the rock." It is as if the Lord is asking, "Peter, do you remember your life before you met me? Do you remember your human weakness?" Peter's mind may have flashed back two weeks to the upper room. There, Peter had declared that he would lay down his life for Jesus. He had made the statement: "Even if all fall away on account of you, I never will. (Matthew 26:33). Then, He lovingly asked Peter a question. "Do you love me more than these?"

In verse 15, what do you think Jesus meant by the words "Do you love me more than these?" To what would the word "these" refer?

Most Bible scholars give two distinct possibilities to what "these" refers. The Lord could have been referring to the other disciples with whom he enjoyed such close fellowship, but He also could have been referring to the nets, boat and fish where Peter had spent most of his life making his living. It is possible that Peter was wondering if he was done with ministry and, perhaps, thought that he had disqualified himself from service in the kingdom of God. With the Lord, though, brokenness is part of the training. The Lord has no sharp rebuke for him, but asks Peter the only question that matters, "Do you love me?" Author Kent Hughes gives us a description, which I love, of what this moment may have been like for Peter:

“The fire on the beach undoubtedly reminded Peter of the one before which he denied his Lord. His thoughts were probably a torrent of emotion – the painful aroma of the fire, the same unblinking, innocent eyes, “more than these,” “I will never fall away.” “Do you love me?” The power of the Lord’s question was mercifully brutal.”¹

Why does the Lord focus on what Peter loves? What does love have to do with being restored to service of Christ? Why does Jesus ask Peter three times?

All service in the kingdom of God flows out of love for Christ. If it is for any other motive it is wood, hay and stubble that will have no reward when the Lord comes. Only service completed out of a motive of love and faithfulness to the person of Christ will stay the course and be of eternal value:

¹⁰By the grace God has given me, I laid a foundation as a wise builder, and someone else is building on it. But each one should build with care. ¹¹For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ. ¹²If anyone builds on this foundation using gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay or straw, ¹³their work will be shown for what it is, because the Day will bring it to light. It will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test the quality of each person’s work. ¹⁴If what has been built survives, the builder will receive a reward. ¹⁵If it is burned up, the builder will suffer loss but yet will be saved—even though only as one escaping through the flames (1 Corinthians 3:10-15).

The picture here is that all of us in the kingdom of God are to do our part on our corner or wall of the living temple that God is building. The apostle Peter later writes, “You also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ” (1 Peter 2:5). There are many things that Peter may have been expecting Jesus to say to him, but I don’t think he was expecting to be asked about his love for Christ. When Jesus asks him the first time, he asked him if he loved Christ with an agape love. Peter responds saying that he loves Christ with an affectionate love, avoiding using the Greek word agape to describe his love. He is no longer self-confident and admits that alongside the tender agape love of the Lord, his love is insufficient to be described as agape love. Each time, Jesus restores Peter back to feeding the Lord’s lambs, taking care of His sheep, and feeding the sheep.

What changes do you think might have taken place in Peter’s heart as a result of his conversation with Jesus in verses 15-23?

Peter’s restoration was complete. The rest of the disciples had witnessed it. This was important because Peter was called to feed and care for the flock of God, and he needed the respect, fellowship and support of the other disciples. They must have all realized by now that the Lord had planned the whole thing, for instance. the charcoal fire and Peter’s confessions. It was as if the Lord Himself set the stage. There had been three confessions of love to answer for the three denials of Peter and then three commissions from the Lord.

¹ R. Kent Hughes, *John, That you May Believe*. Preaching the Word Series, Crossway Publishers, Page 472.

It is important for us to grasp that Christ's love for Peter was just as strong and just the same as it was before his denial. We are not loved any less for our failures. The important thing is that we make love our focus and return to the Lord every time. Rebound back into the grace of the Lord Jesus and the calling of God for your life. Peter did return to God's calling for his life and eventually was martyred for his faith. Jesus also foretold this when he said to Peter:

“Very truly I tell you, when you were younger you dressed yourself and went where you wanted; but when you are old you will stretch out your hands and someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go. Jesus said this to indicate the kind of death by which Peter would glorify God. Then he said to him, “Follow me!” (John 21:18-19).

We have come to the end of our study of the book of John. I hope that you, like me, have been reminded of the love of God and encouraged by how deep His love is for all of us. Tradition tells us that the apostle John went on to live a long life, and love seems to be his constant theme until the end. It has been recorded that John was the only one to escape a violent death, although he did suffer persecution during his ministry (e.g., being cast into a boiling vat of oil in Rome, and later being banished to the Isle of Patmos where he wrote the book of Revelation). It is said that he lived in Ephesus in his later years, until he was so old he had to be carried into meetings where he was reported to have encouraged the believers by often saying, “Little children, love one another!”

We are left with two commands from the Lord at the end of this final chapter of John. The commands are “Feed my sheep and “follow me.”

Prayer: Father, thank you for the words of life that we have studied in the Book of John. Thank you also, for the love, grace and mercy of Christ extended to each of us. Continue to change us from the inside out as we think on all that you have done for us at the cross of Christ. Just as John has told us about that breakfast where you ate with your disciples, we, too, long to see you in all your glory. Come quickly, Lord Jesus!

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