

42. Jesus Reinstates Peter

John 21:1-17

The Gospel According to John

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. John now comes to the last chapter of his Gospel, an epilogue, and a conclusion concerning Peter's failure. John doesn't want to leave us wondering how it all worked out for Peter after his three-time denial, and he shares with us the story of his total reconciliation and restoration. In this study, we will glimpse the Lord's grace, for when He reinstated Peter, it was to his full measure as an apostle. These words should give hope and encouragement to everyone who knows what it is like to experience failure. I think that includes all of us!

Throughout chapter twenty, the apostle John pointed to various testimonies of individuals who were witnesses to have seen and talked to the risen Lord. We know that the first time was inside the locked room on the night of the resurrection, the night Thomas was not there. The second time was a week later when Christ appeared again to the disciples, but this time to Thomas as well (John 20:26). The appearance at the Sea of Galilee was the third time Jesus appeared to His disciples collectively. Matthew records that Jesus told them that He would see them at the Sea of Galilee (Matthew 28:10).

The Disciples Go Fishing

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 (John 21:1-3).

I have visited the Galilee area of Israel several times, and it is a very peaceful place. The Sea of Galilee is not a significant body of water, more the size of a lake, approximately twelve miles north to south and about six miles wide. The Scriptures also refer to it as Lake Gennesaret, while the Romans called it the Sea of Tiberias. With the seven days of the Feast of Unleavened Bread now over, they began the eighty-mile walk north to the Galilee area of Israel.

After the resurrection, as the disciples made their way north to the Galilee, what kind of questions do you think they had on their minds to ask Jesus? What do you think was on Peter's mind as he prepared to see Jesus?

Imagine Peter's feelings during that three to four-day journey as he anticipated this meeting with Christ. Very likely, he was struggling with his denial of Christ and what Jesus would say to him. He might not have felt worthy of being in the company of the other disciples, for he had failed so miserably, but most of the other disciples ran away when the soldiers came to arrest Christ. The Lord knew Peter's heart. He made sure Peter got the invitation! When the angels appeared to the women at the empty tomb, they made sure Peter was explicitly invited to the reunion in Galilee:

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).

We all fear confrontation. Confrontation, though, can be one of the most loving things a person can do or have done to them, depending on how they are spoken to and approached. The Lord told Peter He would see him in Galilee, which I am sure the enemy, Satan, took advantage of by whispering accusingly in his ear. We have all had times when the enemy has brought us face to face with our failures. Satan has a way of beating us up when we fail. He is not called "the accuser of the brothers" for nothing (Revelation 12:10). The enemy of our souls would have us believe we are not worthy, hoping to halt our growth and effectiveness in the Lord.

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. 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 because we have been doing something threatening his kingdom. He doesn't bother those who are spiritually asleep. If he is giving you a hard time and accusing you of your failure, it is because he knows that, if you ever fall forward, you will get up stronger. Satan wants us to fall backward and to backslide under his condemnation and accusation.

When we confess our sin to the Lord, we receive grace and forgiveness. Thankfulness and appreciation of grace make us stronger and deepen our dependence on our God. It is how we respond to failure that makes the difference in where we go from that point. When we fail, the enemy tempts us to look back just like Lot's wife who looked back longingly to Sodom and turned into a pillar of salt (Genesis 19:26). When the going gets tough, 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 backward. 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 follow Him, I left my nets and began cleaning windows for a fragile living. The Lord had me in training for many years before I was in full-time ministry. There were times when 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.

To a person who has experienced living by and on the sea, there is a particular attraction. It can be the tranquility 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?

Gone Fishing

Peter said to the other disciples,

“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).

What kind of thoughts prompted Peter’s desire to go fishing? What do you think would have happened to Peter if he went 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?

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 when we influence others to sin, it is another matter entirely. Going fishing was not sinning. It was something familiar to them and something to do while they waited for Jesus, but when something takes people from doing what God has called them to do, it is a slippery slope toward serving self rather than the Lord. When we are too busy for the things of God, we are busier than the Lord wants us to be. The result is a lack of fulfillment inside our spirit. 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. He can plow a straight furrow if he fixes his eyes on a particular point ahead of him. There is a problem, though, if he tries to plow a straight furrow by looking behind him, he will not be a fruitful servant. In the year 1519, Captain Hernán Cortés landed in Veracruz to begin his conquest of Mexico. Upon arriving, he gave the order to his men to burn the ships, so that there would be no thought of going back until they had victory. In our lives as believers in Christ, there are some things that one must burn so that we don’t ever think of going back to our old lives.

What things did you burn of your old life so that you would not think of returning? Either that or what things need to be burned?

We are to fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith (Hebrews 12:2). The Lord knew that, without His restoration and commission, Peter would return to his old way of life. Christ did not let them cling to the past failures but restored Peter to his calling to feed God’s sheep.

After the disciples had been fishing all night, John wrote that early in the morning Jesus called to them from the shore, asking them about their catch in the negative, almost as if He knew that they had no fish:

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 (John 21:4-8).

Some people say that one can never trust fishermen to tell the truth about what they have caught. I hope 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 you might be at the same spot the next day! If he isn't catching any fish, then they won't tell you that, either, because it is a shame for a fisherman not to catch fish. 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 speaking to them, when Jesus said to try the right side of the boat, they did so. Immediately, they caught a tremendous number 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 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 at the optimum time and catching nothing. When they obeyed the Lord, they caught so many fish that they filled both boats near to sinking! (Luke 5:4-11). The Lord used that miracle to invite them to follow Him, i.e., from that day forward, they would be catching men. At that saying, the four fishermen (Peter, Andrew, James and John) left all and followed Him.

Now, again, Jesus demonstrated His authority over nature by giving them a supernatural catch. When they saw the number of fish caught at an unusual time, it confirmed to them who it was on the shore as they realized that they had seen this superabundant catch happen before (Luke 5:4-7). Referring to himself as the disciple that Jesus loved, John said excitedly to Peter, **"It is the Lord!"** (v. 7). What a welcome sight Jesus was, and how wonderful that He would revisit this same place and remind them of His first encounter with them.

At the words of John, Peter hurriedly 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 pull in the net with the fish (John 21:11). All workers are needed to pull in the net. Let's fish in that pond a few minutes:

Many fish can be lost if all hands were not joined in pulling in the net. It is the same today for many millions have never heard of the Savior. If we don't put our hands to the nets, how will the distant nations hear and be saved?

Pulling the Nets Together

⁴⁷Again, 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 that others need.

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

As Christians, if we can't go into the world to share the Gospel, we should do what we can to promote our Lord's kingdom. What is a net? A net 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, the time of harvest is where those who have sown their resources with broken, weeping hearts for the lost, will see a time when the wheat, a symbol of God's people, are gathered together.

Breakfast with Jesus

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 21:9-14).

It is worth noting that, when the disciples came ashore, Jesus already had a charcoal fire burning and waiting for the fish. 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 the Lord multiplied the fish and the bread for five thousand people. Now, here he was feeding them again. Just as in the upper room when He washed their feet, He now fixed their breakfast. I wonder if Peter noticed that Jesus was not cooking the fish on a wood fire and that it was a charcoal fire. If he did notice, I wonder if he was taken back nearly two weeks before to when he pleaded that He didn't know Jesus there in the courtyard of the high priest. 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). Peter left the charcoal fire a broken man, but in our passage today, he is restored beside a charcoal fire.

Peter needed forgiveness from the Lord, but he also needed to forgive himself. Many of us reading these words need to do likewise. If Peter were given responsibility to feed the flock of God, he needed to be forgiven and restored in the presence of the others. He 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 on an issue, the hard part is bringing up whatever has to be resolved. How did Jesus bring up the topic? The first thing we see is that the Lord called him by the name by which he grew up, i.e., Simon, son of John. It was as if the Lord was asking, “Peter, do you remember your life before we met? Do you remember your human weakness?” Peter's mind may have flashed back two weeks to the upper room when Peter declared that he would lay down his life for Jesus, saying, “**Even if all fall away on account of you, I never will**” (Matthew 26:33). Christ lovingly brought up the issue by asking 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?

There are two distinct possibilities as to what the word “these” refers. The Lord could have been talking about 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 spent most of his life making his living. Perhaps, Peter was wondering if he was done with ministry and thought that he had disqualified himself from service in the kingdom of God. With the Lord, though, brokenness is part of the training. Jesus had no sharp criticism for him, but asked Peter the only question that mattered, “Do you love me?” Author Kent Hughes gives us a description 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 the 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 (1 Corinthians 3:10-15). Only the kind of service motivated by love and faithfulness to the person of Christ will be of eternal value. There are many things Peter may have been expecting Jesus to say to him, but I don't think he was planning to be asked about his love for Christ. When Jesus asked Peter the first time, He asked him if he loved Him with *agape* love. *Agape* is a sacrificial love that voluntarily suffers inconvenience, discomfort, and even death for the benefit of another without expecting anything in return. Peter responded by saying that he loved Christ with an affectionate

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

love, avoiding using the Greek word *agape* to describe his love. He was no longer self-confident and admitted that alongside the tender *agape* love of the Lord, his love was insufficient to be characterized as *agape* love. For the three denials, there was the question of who would Peter put first in his life along with a three-time recommission. The Lord restored Peter to feed the Lord's lambs, take care of His sheep, and feed His sheep; this is the primary job of a pastor, i.e., to feed God's flock.

As a result of Peter's conversation with Jesus in verses 15-17, what changes do you think took place in Peter's heart?

Peter's restoration was complete with the disciples' witnessing it. He would need the respect, fellowship, and support of the other disciples. There had been three confessions of love to answer for the three denials of Peter, and there were three commissions from the Lord.

We need 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 love and gratitude for Christ are always to be our focus. Rebound back into the grace of the Lord Jesus and the calling of God for your life. Peter did respond to God's calling for his life and was eventually martyred for his faith. Jesus 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 now come to the end of our study in the book of John. I hope that you, like me, are reminded of the deep love Christ has 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 is 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 banished to the Isle of Patmos where he wrote the book of *Revelation*). Tradition says that John was not martyred but was released from Patmos and went on to live in the city of Ephesus (now in Turkey) to old age, often saying to the Christians in that city, "Little children, love one another!"

Two commands from the Lord we leave with you 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 through what You have done for us at the cross. Come quickly, Lord Jesus, we long to see you in all Your glory. Amen!

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