

## Restoring Peter

We come today to the final chapter of John, chapter 21. Seven of the eleven remaining disciples have gathered beside the Sea of Galilee and Peter announces to the rest of them that he is returning to his career as a fisherman. Let's review the context to make sure we're seeing what's going on.

Jesus has risen and has been seen alive by all of the disciples, including Peter on more than one occasion. Peter knows that Jesus has defeated death and has overcome the power of sin. He knows that the mission that the Father gave to Jesus has been accomplished and that a whole new world is now opening up to those who have known Him, who believe in Him. So why does he decide to leave the work of God and return to fishing?

He is ashamed. He had boasted that he would be willing to die for Jesus, he'd lay everything on the line for the Master he loved so much. And then the test had come and he had failed miserably. He hadn't even had the courage to acknowledge that he knew Jesus to a woman watching the gate, a household servant and a group of people trying to keep warm around a charcoal fire. When they had asked the question, "Aren't you a follower of Jesus?" he had denied it vehemently. His boasting had proven to be hollow, while Jesus' prophetic word that Peter would deny three times that he even knew Jesus - that night - before the rooster crowed in the morning - was accurate to the letter. The boasting was vain and foolish. It was nothing but words without the courage to back them up and Peter had to face himself and his failure in a way he'd never had to deal with before. "What can I possibly do to make up for my failure?" I'm sure he asked himself that question over and over.

And now, here he is, walking along the edge of the familiar waters he had fished countless times before and he gave up all the hope he had once had that he could be someone of value in the Kingdom of God. I'm sure he was saying things like, "I'm good for nothing. I denied my Lord. I'm as bad as that traitor Judas. What can Jesus ever count on me for again?"

They fish all night and catch nothing. As the early morning dawn is breaking, they see a man on the shore and the man calls out to them, "Have you caught any fish?" When they tell Him that they've caught nothing, He calls back, "Throw out your net on the right-hand side of the boat, and you'll get plenty of fish." Seriously? I mean, seriously! They must have wondered about those strange instructions - just throw out the nets on the other side of the boat? But maybe they were too tired to argue with the stranger, so they threw the nets out and soon they were packed with fish, so many that they couldn't lift them out of the water into the boat.

The miraculous catch of fish triggers John's mind and he knows who that man is on the shore. He turns to Peter and tells him, "It's the Lord." Peter dives in and swims the 300' to shore and the others haul the fish in to shore behind the boat. And what does John tell us that they see when they get there? Verse 9:

*When they got there, they saw that a charcoal fire was burning and fish were frying over it, and there was bread.*

A charcoal fire was burning. There is plenty of drift-wood on the shores of the Sea of Galilee. Jesus could have piled some of it together and got enough small bits together to start a fire, but it would have a different look and a different smell than a charcoal fire would. Peter stumbles ashore all soaking wet and the first thing he is confronted with is the same smell as he smelled when he was warming himself around a fire outside the place where Jesus was being tried by the high priest and the Jewish Council. It was near that fire, near that distinctive charcoal smell, that Peter had denied three times that he even knew Jesus. And now that smell fills his nostrils again and he can't help but feel those feelings of shame and failure again.

The Greek word *anthrakia* is only used twice in the New Testament. It means 'charcoal fire' and it is used in John 18 where Peter denied his Lord and it's used here in John 21 where Jesus restores Peter. There is a symmetry in Scripture and it often points to God's grace.

But first, Jesus serves them all breakfast. Fish and bread. Do you remember other occasions where Jesus served people fish and bread - or, as we more usually call it, loaves and fishes? It's another picture for us of grace, of God looking to our needs before He sets us off into mission or places a new challenge before us. Jesus had compassion on the hungry multitudes who had come to hear Him teach and so He multiplied bread and fish and fed them all. And here He has compassion on His tired fisher friends and He prepares a meal for them. There's something really sweet about this picture for me. I'm one who can reduce my relationship with Jesus to what I'm doing or failing to do for Him. I could easily see myself in Peter's shoes and feeling awkward because of my failures or feeling shame. What would Jesus do? He knows Peter has made the decision to leave off the ministry of the Kingdom and go back to his fishing business. He knows the failure and frustration. But He's not going to let Peter get away.

The first lesson of the night for Peter is that he can't just go back to life the way it was before he met Jesus. There is no way back - the fish won't bite. They fished all night and the fish weren't there to get caught in the nets. But when the Lord of Creation called them in the early morning they were there in abundance. Jesus was showing Peter that he still needed his Master. Peter still needed to hear the voice of His Lord and to follow it. Jesus is setting His friend Peter up for the conversation that followed right after breakfast.

*After breakfast Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon, son of John, do you love Me more than these?" (21:15)*

Hold on a minute. Who are "these". Is Jesus asking Peter if Peter loves Him more than these other disciples love Him? Is He asking Peter if he loves Jesus more than he loves the other disciples? Or, is He asking Peter if he loves what he's doing, loves his fishing boats and nets and being an independent businessman? The first two are very unlikely, even though they are grammatically possible. How would Peter be able to

know how much the other disciples loved Jesus and compare himself to them? And what reason would Jesus have for questioning the degree of love that Peter had for the other disciples? That doesn't make sense, and Peter's commitment to the other disciples is not at stake anywhere else in this passage.

The thing that has been at stake is Peter's love for Jesus, his willingness to continue to pursue the kingdom of God rather than return to his old career as a fisherman on the Sea of Galilee. "Simon, son of John, do you love Me more than you love these fish, these tools of the trade, these waters, this boat, this freedom? Simon, what is the most important thing in your life?"

Peter's answer is simply, "Yes, Lord, You know I love You." And Jesus comes back with, "Then feed My lambs." Jesus is not abandoning Peter because Peter failed Him at the crucial hour. He is giving Peter a huge responsibility in shepherding His flock, looking after His lambs. Jesus had referred to Himself earlier in John as the "Good Shepherd" and here He is giving Peter the opportunity and the responsibility of being His "under-shepherd", one who will give care to those who belong to Jesus.

But the Master isn't finished. Now He asks Peter the question a second time: "Simon, son of John, do you love Me?" "Yes, Lord, You know I love You."

And then comes the piercing moment when Jesus asks the question a third time: "Simon son of John, do you love Me?" This is also part of the symmetry of the biblical narrative of grace. If we are going to deal with the past in an effective, satisfying way, we have to deal with what really happened in the past. Scripture doesn't start a brand new thing that has no connection to the past. Everything we read about Jesus and His journey to the cross has echoes going back centuries to the experiences of Israel in the Old Testament. The lamb sacrificed at Passover, the blood on the doorposts that protected the lives of the firstborn, the bronze snake lifted up on a pole in the wilderness, the longing of King David for God's Kingdom to extend over the whole earth, the prophecies of worthless shepherds and of God coming someday to shepherd His sheep.

And we can't miss the fact that Jesus is addressing Peter's three-fold denial - "I don't know the man!" - with this three-fold question: "Simon, son of John, do you love Me?" Peter certainly doesn't miss Jesus' point - it levels him:

*Peter was grieved that Jesus asked the question a third time. He said, "Lord, you know everything. You know I love You."*

*Jesus said, "Then feed My sheep. The truth is, when you were young, you were able to do as you liked and go wherever you wanted to. But when you are old, you will stretch out your hands and others will direct you and take you where you don't want to go." Jesus said this to let him know what kind of death he would die to glorify God. Then Jesus told him, "Follow Me."*

*Peter turned around and saw the disciple Jesus loved following them . . . Peter asked Jesus, "What about him, Lord?"*

*Jesus replied, "If I want him to remain alive until I return, what is that to you? You follow Me." (John 21:17-22)*

Just as the question doesn't change: "Do you love Me?", so the call doesn't change: "Then feed My lambs" or "then feed My sheep". Jesus is asking Peter if his love for his Master is greater than his love for his old occupation and when Peter answers, "yes, of course" then Jesus describes Peter's new job to him: "you will be taking care of the flock, taking care of those who are willing to follow Me in changing the world." The huge and very obvious point of what Jesus is doing here is to point out to Peter, "I know that you failed". That's the reason for the charcoal fire and asking him three times if he loves him.

But then, in that context of saying, "I know you, Peter", Jesus is saying something of huge significance: "and you are useful in My service. I need you, Peter, and I have important work for you to do." Jesus confronts Peter with his sin, but He doesn't define Peter by his sin. Jesus addresses the failure, but He does so in grace and in giving Peter a huge responsibility - to take care of Jesus' followers. But Jesus also has a very heavy word for Peter; He tells him that he will be a martyr for the cause of Christ, probably indicating that he will, like Jesus, die by crucifixion. That's what some scholars make of the sentence, "When you are old, you will stretch out your hands and others will direct you and take you where you don't want to go." The tradition of the church tells us that Peter was crucified upside down in Rome during the reign of the emperor Nero.

Peter's response is interesting at this point. He turns around and sees John following them and he just has to ask: "What about Him, Lord?" I can't quite wrap my head around it. Is this just a reporting of the story? Is this just something that happened and John felt he should include it? Or, if, like most things in this gospel, it means something more, what does it mean that John would choose to include this little snippet? I've read enough to conclude that nobody really knows, but I think it's meant to tie in with what Jesus has just been telling Peter.

- a. That Peter will have a ministry to the church, but he may or may not have John's help. What he will most need is not John's presence, but Jesus' presence. "You follow Me."
- b. That Peter may have felt a real concern for John and wanted to know if his friend and companion through the past few years would also have to suffer for His faith in Jesus.
- c. In either case, there is an important point that Jesus is making and that is the need for each person to focus on their role in discipleship, that of following Jesus. If someone has a different experience with the Lord than I have, that doesn't make theirs more or less meaningful or important than mine. I love how C.S. Lewis portrays this curiosity about what will happen to somebody else. Whenever one of the children ask Aslan, the Christ-figure in the Narnia stories, what's going to happen to someone else, Aslan always tells them that it's not for them to know someone else's story. The truth is, it would be hard to know that someone we care for is going to suffer a horrible death or that someone we don't think highly of is

going to far exceed our expectations, or that a person with whom we've had a painful argument is going to be given greater responsibilities than ours. It's interesting to picture this scene and see that while Jesus and Peter are walking and talking, John is following, and in following he is fulfilling his role, responding to the call.

Let's look at this final chapter of John and just think for a few minutes about what this might be saying to us. What is being communicated in this last scene on the beach by the Sea of Galilee that could make a difference for you or for me today?

1. Let's start with the really, really obvious. What is important in our lives is who or what we love, who or what we give our hearts to, who or what we choose to put first. Jesus wasn't being mean to Peter when He asked him if he loved Him; He was just asking the most important question. And He made it clear to Peter that this decision, to love Jesus, would cost him everything, including his freedom and ultimately his life. But when Peter answered the question, three times, by saying that he loved Jesus, then the door to opportunity opened wide. He could now be the shepherd that the early church would need. He could be looked to, to look after the new believers and help them mature in their faith. And Jesus trusted him with all of this because He knew that Peter would be filled with the Holy Spirit and would be bold in his witness and would love the believers and be a faithful and courageous leader - and He knew Peter loved Him.
2. The second thing I think we have to point out from this chapter is that the past is less important than the future. We are easily brought down by our past, by the things we've done or failed to do, by the opportunities missed or messed up. As those misses and messes pile up, we can write a script about our lives that is so negative that we wouldn't want anyone to read it, so we keep it inside. But this script talks back to us, tell us what we are and what we are not, and keeps us from having the confidence to go all in in our walk with Jesus. Now, notice how Jesus dealt with the failures in Peter's life - He didn't ignore them, didn't pretend they weren't there, but He also didn't dwell on them. He knew Peter was sorry, desperately sorry, and so He didn't ask for an apology or a promise to do better. He really just asked Peter if he could be really on board with the Kingdom of Heaven and, if he could be, Jesus wanted Peter to know that he would be a leader, a main guy, someone who was responsible for looking after others. Your script may tell you that you've been disqualified from any of the big stuff because of failures in your past, but Jesus is asking, "Do you love Me?" And when we say, "Yes, Lord, You know I love You", He opens doors for us to serve Him, to bless and encourage and lead and help the people He has loved and given Himself for. The future is more important than the past.
3. Third thing: as disappointing as this is for some of us - it's not important that we know how the story will unfold for others. If God gives you a picture or a word for someone, a prophetic vision for ministry that will open up for them at some future point, then go for it - let them know. But if you just find yourself wondering, "What will he be doing, Lord?", expect Jesus to say, "What does that matter to you? - you follow Me." We need to find our security of purpose in following Jesus and that will often mean that we don't know who will support us in ministry, who will share the

load or be faithful in prayer for us. Which is good for us, because it means that we have to put our full weight, our complete trust, in Jesus.

4. There is one more application on the list for today, and I hope you find it encouraging. Once you surrender yourself to the love of God, revealed in Jesus, there is no going back. I know there are people who used to go to church but who don't go any more - that's not what I'm talking about. I'm talking about the people who have given their hearts to their Lord, who have followed Him, been filled with His Spirit, walked in His ways and delighted in His Presence. God has a way of hanging on - like Jesus hung on to Peter in John 21. We sometimes sing, "Oh, no, You never let go, through the calm and through the storm, Oh, no, You never let go, in every high and every low." We could call it Peter's song. But it's also our song. It reminds us that our God is for us, not against us, that He has good plans for our lives, that He loves us with unfailing love.