

## **JOHN AND THE BOOK OF SIGNS (11) THE FATE OF PETER**

John 21:15-19

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### **SCRIPTURE**

<sup>15</sup>After breakfast Jesus asked Simon Peter, “Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?” “Yes, Lord,” Peter replied, “you know I love you.” “Then feed my lambs,” Jesus told him. <sup>16</sup>Jesus repeated the question: “Simon son of John, do you love me?” “Yes, Lord,” Peter said, “you know I love you.” “Then take care of my sheep,” Jesus said. <sup>17</sup>A third time he asked him, “Simon son of John, do you love me?” Peter was hurt that Jesus asked the question a third time. He said, “Lord, you know everything. You know that I love you.” Jesus said, “Then feed my sheep. <sup>18</sup>“I tell you the truth, when you were young, you were able to do as you liked; you dressed yourself and went wherever you wanted to go. But when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and others will dress you and take you where you don’t want to go.” <sup>19</sup>Jesus said this to let him know by what kind of death he would glorify God. Then Jesus told him, “Follow me” (John 21:15-19 NLT).

### **INTRODUCTION**

A few hours before his arrest, Jesus and Simon Peter had an emotional exchange:

“All of you will desert me [Jesus stated] . . . [But Peter said], “Even if everyone else deserts you, I never will.” Jesus replied, “I tell you the truth, Peter—this very night, before the rooster crows twice, you will deny three times that you even know me.” “No!” Peter declared emphatically. “Even if I have to die with you, I will never deny you!” (Mark 14:27-31 NLT).

Such was Peter’s disposition before the crucifixion. But as most everyone knows, by the end of that night, Peter disowned Jesus three times. When Jesus died, Peter did not die with him. In fact Peter did not even dare to show his face before Pilate to claim the body of his dead teacher and friend.

What happened to Peter?

## **1. THE FATE OF PETER – RESTORATION**

Up to this point in the story it seemed like he was doing well. But he fell apart. He did not live up to his nickname.

It was not uncommon for rabbis to give characterizing nicknames to their disciples. In the Old Testament, God often changed names to describe some new characteristic of a person (Abraham, Sarah, Jacob). Jesus called Simon "Cephas" which is the Aramaic word for rock. Peter is from the Greek word for rock. But his nickname was not a description of his present character but a promise of what he would someday become.

[Jesus asked], "But who do you say I am?" Simon Peter answered, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." Jesus replied, "You are blessed, Simon son of John, because my Father in heaven has revealed this to you. You did not learn this from any human being. Now I say to you that you are Peter (which means 'rock') and upon this rock I will build my church, and all the powers of hell will not conquer it. And I will give you the keys of the Kingdom of Heaven (Matt 16:15b-19a NLT).

So Peter was chosen for greatness. But after his dramatic failure on the night Jesus was arrested, how could he ever hope to achieve anything worthwhile? He was dispirited and defeated, how could he carry on?

The answers would come out of two important events: the resurrection of Jesus and the restoration of Peter.

The resurrection of Jesus is the ultimate miraculous sign in the gospels. John 21 contains one of the ten recorded appearances of Jesus after his resurrection. This was the third appearance to his closest disciples and the seventh overall. This was approximately the second week after Jesus rose from the dead. The location would have been the north shore of the Sea of Galilee also known as Tiberias. Many of you heard me last week refer to this as "The Resurrection Breakfast."

Immediately following this breakfast Jesus asks Peter three times, "Do you love me?" Three times Peter replies, "Yes" – the last expressed with some measure of exasperation as Peter did not understand, at first, why Jesus would ask essentially the same question three times. But this was Jesus' gracious way of restoring Peter after Peter's three-fold denial.

There are differences in the wording of the questions and answers. In the original Greek

language of the text, different words for love are used. Peter uses the same word, *phileo*. every time he answers, Jesus uses that word the third time has asks the question but uses *agapao* the first two times. Is this significant? Some think so. Many, including myself, do not. The reason I believe this is because elsewhere in his gospel John uses these two words interchangeably. For example, both words are used of the Father's love for the Son (10:17; 15:9; 17:23, 24, 26/5:20), Jesus' love for Lazarus (11:5/11:3, 36), and the Father's love for the disciples (14:23/16:27).

There are also differences in the three charges. Jesus tells Peter to feed his lambs, take care of his sheep, and feed his sheep. The word "sheep" is used in John's Gospel to represent believers. "Lambs" appears to be a variation on this. Again, there does not seem to be any significance to the difference in wording. Rather, this is part of Jesus' gracious restoration of Peter – he is forgiven and his life has purpose. Feed my lambs, take care of my sheep, feed my sheep. Following Jesus and loving Jesus mean accepting responsibility for Jesus' people.

The fate of Peter is "Good News" for us. The fact that Peter was clearly forgiven by Jesus and given new responsibilities despite his total betrayal of his Lord, can give real hope to those of us today who feel we have denied Jesus and that this is unforgivable. He asks only that we turn back to him in love so that we can know we are forgiven and know that our lives have purpose.

## **2. THE FATE OF PETER – SACRIFICE**

Before the crucifixion Peter had boasted to Jesus about how great a disciple he was:

"I'm ready to die for you" (John 13: 37).

But, of course, that was not true. Not yet. After the resurrection it was a different story.

One of the most persuasive arguments that Christ rose from the dead is the effect it had on his followers then and now. What was it that changed a band of frightened, cowardly disciples into people of courage and conviction? What was it that changed Peter from one who, the night before the crucifixion, was so afraid for his own skin that he three times denied he even knew Jesus, into a roaring lion of faith? Only the resurrection of Christ could have produced this change.

After Jesus rose from the dead and Peter was restored he was ready to face whatever the world threw at him. Jesus predicts in verse 18 that Peter will die a martyr's death to the glory of God. Peter will not have control even over dressing himself for a journey—in this case, being prepared for execution. There is a fairly strong tradition that Peter was

crucified in Rome under Emperor Nero about A.D. 64.

There is a legend that Peter was crucified upside-down. This was first mentioned by a book called, *The Acts of Peter*, written about A.D. 190 (or about 125 years after Peter died). The book has some weird stuff like Peter resurrecting a tuna. But there are also things in it that may have some historical basis.

The book tells us that Peter requested to be crucified upside-down. People often assume this was out of humility. Peter did not think himself worthy to be crucified the same way as his Lord was. However, the book never says this. More likely this idea was a statement on the impact of the Gospel – it turns the world upside-down.

But did it really happen? Was Peter crucified upside-down? Sean McDowell<sup>1</sup> says:

We do have evidence Roman executioners varied their crucifixion practices for their own sadistic pleasure. . .so it is not intrinsically implausible Peter was crucified upside-down. Nevertheless, do you think Roman executioners took suggestions from criminals as to how they wanted to be crucified? Probably not. Still, while it's possible the tradition of Peter's upside-down crucifixion preserves an actual memory of his fate, the historical evidence is simply inconclusive.

Nevertheless, the upside-down cross is a common symbol for the Apostle Peter and is frequently depicted in stained glass windows. We may not know the manner of his death but we know it was because he was a witness for the Gospel of Christ – the original meaning of the word “martyr.” Because so many martyrs died during the first three centuries of Christianity the word “martyr” came to mean one who was willing to die for his or her beliefs.

The fate of Peter reminds us that we too are called upon to make sacrifices. It may not be martyrdom like he experienced – though that remains a possibility for every Christ-follower. It may involve giving up something that stands in our way of loving God and loving our neighbors as ourselves. It most certainly involves a daily dying to self-will (“Not my will by Your will be done” (Lk 22:42). More positively, the New Testament speaks of the sacrifice of praise and the sacrifice of love. In Hebrews we read:

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<sup>1</sup>Sean McDowell, Ph.D. is a professor of Christian Apologetics at Biola University.

“Therefore, let us offer through Jesus a continual sacrifice of praise to God, proclaiming our allegiance to his name” (Heb 13:15 NLT).

If you come to church and it is the desire of your heart to praise God then that pleases God. On the other hand, if you come to church and there is no desire in your heart to praise God then you have come empty-handed and God finds that loathsome.

We are to offer the sacrifice of praise. We are also to offer the sacrifice of love. In the next verse in Hebrews we read:

“And don’t forget to do good and to share with those in need. These are the sacrifices that please God.” (Heb 13:16 NLT).

If God has loved us, though we deserve it not, we can love others. This is a sacrifice of caring for others.

Of course, any sacrifice we make cannot be compared to the sacrifice Jesus made on behalf of the whole world.

### **3. THE FATE OF PETER – DISCIPLESHIP**

Andrew introduced his brother Peter to Jesus (John 1: 40-42). He invited them to follow him. For more than three years they did just that. Here in our text from John 21 Jesus repeats the invitation to Peter. “Follow me.”

Actually, it is more than an invitation. It is a command. It is a present imperative, meaning it is best translated as, “Keep on following me.”

The fate of Peter teaches us that following Jesus is not a one time thing but a lifetime adventure.

A follower of Jesus is known as a disciple. The word that is translated as "disciple" is from a word that means "to learn in a particular way." It has three necessary characteristics: learning by experience, learning with consistency, and learning by submission.

Learning by experience means we are not content with having mere head knowledge about Jesus but we also want to live out what he has taught us. We want to experience him in the here and now.

Consistency is at the heart of the word "disciple." Indeed, it is the heart of discipleship

itself. Anyone can be prayerful, loving and dedicated for a short time. Anyone can look spiritual for one hour. But Christ calls us to have a consistency in the way we serve him.

The athletes who compete at the Olympic Games do not get there by talent alone. It requires discipline, that is, training with consistency. They train in all kinds of weather, when their muscles are wracked with pain, and whether they are "in the mood" or not. Consistency builds discipline and discipline yields effectiveness. So it is with those who follow Christ. Consistency builds discipline and discipline yields spiritual effectiveness.

None of us will be perfect at this in this life. We will make mistakes. We will get distracted. We will from time-to-time stumble and fall down. But the good news is, if we turn to God in such circumstances he will forgive us and restore us, pick us up, dust us off and send us on our way again.

Submission means to put oneself under the authority of another. Americans in general do not like to do this. But Christ is not some worldly authority or some clever con artist trying to trick us into doing what we do not want to do. Rather, Christ is worthy of our full trust. He knows us better than we know ourselves. He knows and can fulfill our deepest needs. It is a good and wise thing to turn our lives over to him and place ourselves under his direction and authority. We need to keep on following him.