

25. JESUS RESTORES THE FALLEN

John 21v15-19.

Introductory background: John 18v12-27. In the upper room Peter has insisted that he will be faithful to Jesus, even if everyone else deserts Him. Jesus, in reply, foretells Peter's denials. Now Jesus is on trial at the home of Annas. This seems to have been an informal examination, possibly while Sanhedrin members were being summoned from their beds in the night. Peter has followed and somehow slipped into the courtyard. He needed courage to do this. The other disciples had fled and were hiding. He is recognised and, as Jesus foretold, denies Jesus three times and the strength and vehemence of his denial is underlined "with oaths". Then the cock crows, and we read: *"The Lord turned and looked straight at Peter. And Peter remembered the word the Lord had spoken to him. Before the cock crows today, you will disown me three times. And he went outside and wept bitterly"* (Luke 22v61,62.)

Peter was not at the scene of Christ's crucifixion. He was full of guilt and shame. He had denied knowing Jesus despite having been with him for more than three years and being one of dearest friends. His story would seem to be that of terrible failure after another. Perhaps that is why so many of us identify with him.

- We make promises to the Lord we don't keep
- We are easily sidetracked from prayer
- We are more inclined to shoot from the hip than show kindness.
- We deny Jesus over and over again.

You would think this would have been the end of Peter after such a catalogue of failure. But we know that was not the case. So what saved him from being totally shipwrecked? There is a big clue in Luke 22v31, 32. Jesus warned Peter of Satan's scheme to dispose of him, and predicted Peter's failure but then said that he had prayed for him. Peter *did* fall, but not fatally, because Christ had prayed specifically for him.

So much then for Peter's denial prior to Jesus' death on the cross. Now we move on to his restoration after the resurrection. Our text is John 21v15-19.

The circumstances leading up to this occasion are significant. The women had come back from the tomb with news that Jesus had risen, and with this message. *"Go and tell his disciples, and Peter"* (Mark 16v7) So Peter had run to the tomb with John and found it empty. He must have been haunted by the way his name had been singled out. What did it mean? Was he being distinguished from the rest because he had denied Jesus? Was he not regarded as a disciple any more? Or was this Jesus' way of telling Peter he was still special? Peter's thoughts must have been running wild. If Jesus really was alive - what was in store for Peter?

Sometime during that same day Jesus appeared to Peter by himself. There is no record in the Gospels of where or how Jesus appeared or what was said at

this meeting. But there are two references to it in the New Testament. Two disciples who had met Jesus on the Emmaus road ran to Jerusalem with the news, only to be told. “It is true. The Lord has risen, and *has appeared to Simon.*” (Luke 24v34. see also 1 Corinthians 15v5)

What is this all about? Jesus was quick to give Peter a foretaste of mercy. Even if no words were said. Peter would know from the look in Jesus’ eyes. He remembered the last time Jesus had looked at him. This appearance to Peter was probably brief, just enough to let him know that Jesus did not intend to deny Peter in the way he had denied Jesus.

Peter was present at two other resurrection appearances of Jesus (John 20v19-23; 24-29) before the one we are looking at in Galilee.

Now we turn to John 21v1-3: Seven of the disciples are fishing in the Sea of Galilee (Tiberias). Peter is the first named because he is the acknowledged leader of the group. This fishing trip has caused some to conclude that the disciples had gone back to their old job. But there is a much more likely explanation. Jesus had told them to go to Galilee where He would appear to them again. (Mark 14v28; 16v7) After the traumas of recent days a fishing trip would have been therapeutic, and as George Beasley-Murray comments, “*the disciples must still eat!*” .

v4-14: They have been fishing at night. Jesus appears at the shore and in the dim light of the early morning is unrecognized. His directions to the men to cast their nets on the other side of the boat are reminiscent of an incident in his earliest days with the disciples. (Luke 5v1-11). Typically Peter plunges into the water and swims ashore. This is not the response of someone who dreads seeing Jesus again. His action confirms that he has already been given personal reassurance by Jesus. Jesus has even prepared breakfast for the disciples, which he supplements with fish they have caught.

v 15-17: While Peter has already had a foretaste of mercy, his denial of Jesus will not be glossed over. After breakfast, the time has come for dealing with the denial and restoring Peter fully. So Jesus singles him out. The conversation takes place beside a charcoal fire reminiscent of the fire that burned as Peter denied Jesus in the High Priest’s courtyard. This word, *anthrakia*, occurs only in these two places in the Gospel of John. (cf. 21v 9 & 18v18.) Perhaps the distinctive smell of charcoal brought back the chilling memory of that night.

1. IT IS A PERSONAL RESTORATION

Jesus addresses Peter as “**Simon, son of John**”. This is a close encounter of the Jesus kind. It is personal. There is no mistaking who Jesus is talking to.

Notice that Jesus does not address him as Peter, the Rock. (Matthew 16v15-18) That name had been made to look very foolish by Peter’s denials. No, it is “**Simon, son of John**”. “*Jesus is facing Peter with his own limitations,*” writes

Bruce Milne) Simon will be “Rocky” in the future, but only when he rests in God’s strength not his own.

It is Peter, the Rock, who writes these words some years later. *“Humble yourselves under God’s mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time. Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you. Be self-controlled and alert. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. Resist him, standing firm in the faith, because you know that your brothers throughout the world are undergoing the same kind of sufferings. And the God of all grace, who called you to his eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while, will himself restore you and make you strong, firm and steadfast. To him be the power for ever and ever. (1 Peter 5v6-11)*

2. IT IS A PUBLIC RESTORATION

It is done in the presence of the other disciples. Peter had boasted before the others in the upper room that *he* would be faithful even if *they* deserted Jesus. Now his restoration involves putting things right, not only with Jesus, but with the other disciples. Peter’s earlier meeting with Jesus had been one-to-one in private; but this had to be done out in the open.

“Do you love me more than these?” Jesus was not asking if Peter loved Him more than he loved the disciples or his fishing nets. Jesus was asking if Peter still claimed to love Him *better than* the other disciples. He was taking Peter back to his Last Supper boast when he claimed to be more reliable and true to Jesus than the rest.

Peter’s reply is interesting. He doesn’t claim to love Jesus better than the others. His denials have shown up his frailty. He has been humbled. So he avoids comparisons and concentrates on his love for Jesus. **“Yes, Lord you know that I love you.”**

3. IT IS A PROBING RESTORATION

v15-17. The conversation between Jesus and Peter is fascinating. Great attention has been given to the use of two different Greek words for “love” (*agape and phileo*) in the text. (The NIV distinguishes them by the use of “truly love” and “love”.) Most scholars say that this is of no significance because the words are used interchangeably in John’s Gospel. But I am with those who believe that the apostle John (who was an ear-witness after all), captures some of the subtleties of the Aramaic conversation by his choice of Greek words. There is something going on here; Jesus is probing and Peter is finding it difficult to meet Jesus’ gaze, and this comes out in the dialogue.

In Jesus’ first two questions, He asks **“Do you truly love (*agapao*) me?** Both times Peter replies **“Yes Lord, you know that I love you” (*phileo*)** Because *agape* is regarded as the stronger form of love (God’s love -unconditional and sacrificial) while *phileo* describes natural friendship and affection – it looks like Peter’s confession of love falls short of what Jesus has described. **“Yes Lord,**

you know that I am your friend.” Peter cannot bring himself to claim such pure and holy love for Christ after his failure; instead he uses the word for simple friendship. Peter has had his old self-confidence crushed. The third time Jesus asks, “**Simon, son of John, do you love (*phileo*) me?** “*Are you (even) my friend?*”

Peter was hurt because Jesus asked him the third time “Simon, son of John, do you love me?” Was Peter hurt that Jesus even questioned his friendship, or was it that Jesus had now asked Peter three times “*do you love me?*” This was a clear echo of Peter’s three times denial. All this was deeply painful for Peter, but Jesus was being thorough. He was probing into Peter’s soul. It was necessary for his complete restoration.

It is possible, however, to get so hung up on the word-play that you miss the main thrust here. The big issue for you and me, as it was for Peter, is “*Do I love Jesus?*” The question probes deep. Do I love Jesus? But what is Jesus looking for?

- Is this about *feelings of love* for Jesus? I don’t think so. There had never been any doubt about Peter’s feelings for Jesus. Many of us can agonize over this. “Why do I not *feel* more love for Jesus?”
- Is this about *our actions matching up to our words of love*? This could be nearer the mark because it is where Peter had failed. Does my life and behaviour match up to my songs on a Sunday?
- Is this about *confessing our love for Jesus before others*? Peter had denied Jesus; he would not even admit that he knew Jesus. We can do much the same.
- Is this about *confessing our love for Jesus to Him*? This is what Peter did each time in this conversation, however feebly. “**Lord, you know that I love you.**”

And Peter was right. Jesus *did know*. He knew all along. In reply to Jesus’ third question Peter expresses himself slightly differently. “**You know that I love you.**” In his first two replies the word for “know” (*oida*) refers to knowledge of objective facts or truths, but here the word refers to a more personal knowledge. *Ginosko* is often used of knowledge that comes out of relationship and personal acquaintance. Peter is saying, “*Jesus, You know me inside out.*”

Jesus knows you and me inside out. He knows us better than we know ourselves. He knows your heart. He knows your deepest desires. He looks beyond and behind our failures and our feelings and our frailties and sees the real you, the real me. And it His assessment that really matters; more than others around us; more even than self-assessment. With all His knowledge, Jesus still truly loved Peter. His love was more than friendship; it was *agape* love; love that had taken Jesus to the cross for Peter – and for you and me.

4. IT IS A PURPOSEFUL RESTORATION

This is more than a restoration; it is a commissioning. The language is pastoral. Jesus is the Good Shepherd. Believers are His sheep. Peter is being commissioned as a pastor in the formative years of the church. Peter's love for Christ is going to find expression in his love for Christ's people. That is a clear Biblical principle. (1 John 4v7-21) Loving God must lead to loving God's people. Commitment to Christ involves commitment to the church of Christ, with all its' weaknesses.

There is "*an ascending scale*" (William Temple) in Jesus' commission to Peter. "**Feed my lambs**" is a reference to new and baby believers; pastors have a special responsibility to get the Word of God into them. "**Take care of my sheep.**" This is the more general work of overseeing the whole flock of God. (See Acts 20v28) "**Feed my sheep**". This is the hardest task of all, teaching more mature believers - those who are no longer lamb but mutton! We see how Peter took this seriously in his first epistle. Peter sees himself as an elder shepherding God's flock; an under-shepherd. Christ Himself is the Chief Shepherd. (See 1 Peter 5v1-4.)

v18-19: Jesus closes on a solemn note. Peter had denied Jesus to avoid sharing His suffering, but the day will come when he *will* share Jesus' suffering. This happened under the Roman Emperor Nero in AD 61. Peter was crucified, but the historian Eusebius records that Peter asked to be crucified upside down because he was not worthy to die as Jesus had.

v19: "**Then (Jesus) said to him, "Follow me."** This was the same invitation Jesus had made to Peter three and half years earlier. (Mark 1v16-18) "**Follow me.**" Now Jesus was inviting Peter to start all over again. Fully restored and freshly commissioned.

*Three times I cried
Three times I lied
Three times Your love for me denied.
Three times I hear Your love for me
Three times I know
That now I am free.
(Words by Neal Croudace)*

John Wilthew. April 2006.