

AWAKEN FROM UNCERTAINTY

God's Dealings with Peter

By Steve Zeisler

In recent weeks we have been studying what might be called a series of "close encounters of the divine kind." These encounters are occasions when God personally and powerfully invested himself in the life of a person of the Old or New Testament in such a way that they were changed eternally. This message and the following two weeks will focus on the events in history that accomplished God's greatest self-disclosure: the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ. We will focus on three people, Peter, Thomas, and Mary, all of whom were present at the crucifixion and saw the risen Lord.

In our discussion of Peter this week and Thomas the following week, we will see that these two men were similar in the respect that they both lived with serious doubts. Thomas doubted the facts. He was of such a nature that he required proof in his own experience, not just the testimony of others, that the rumors of a risen Christ were true.

Peter's doubts, however, were not about the facts, but about himself. Peter had become uncertain about himself. It was precisely because he knew of his weakness and capacity to fail that he wondered if what Jesus said about him could be true. We will see that Jesus' post-resurrection appearance in John 21 was designed especially to deal with Peter's inward struggles with uncertainty.

PETER'S BACKGROUND

I want to set the scene for this encounter before we actually read John 21. The first point to note is that Peter the apostle had as much reason to be confident of the words of Christ as any human being who ever lived. At the beginning of Jesus' public ministry Peter was a follower of John the Baptist, the last of the prophets, who identified the Lamb of God who would take away the sins of the world. Further, it was Peter who was quickly drawn into an inner circle of three disciples, with James and John, to whom Jesus gave most of his time and attention. Peter was one of those three who was allowed to go to the Mount of Transfiguration and see Jesus glorified. When Jesus asked who men understood him to be, it was Peter who answered on the behalf of others, "You are the Christ, the son of the living God." It was Peter whose name was changed from Simon to Petros, the rock. Peter was one of the two apostles who went to the tomb after the resurrection, saw it empty, and knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that Jesus had risen just as he said.

Peter had every possible advantage. After his resurrection, Jesus breathed the Spirit on his disciples when he met with them in the Upper Room in Jerusalem. He continued by saying that they would have a ministry of discipleship with authority to declare the forgiveness of sins of others. Peter had seen the Lord pass through the walls of the room where the disciples met with him. He had seen Thomas worship Christ when his doubts were removed.

John 21 falls within an interim period between the preceding events and the coming of the Spirit on Pentecost. In the 40 days in which the followers of Jesus were told to wait for the birth of the church to take place, they went back to Galilee to wait. It is at this interim period of waiting that we can imagine Peter's own uncertainties about himself. He never doubted that Christ was raised or his position as Savior to the world. His concern had to do with whether the Lord could actually use him, an ordinary fisherman who had failed to stand with Jesus in his hour of trial. Peter's uncertainties concerned the nature of his own inadequacies and his own place in the plan of God.

I submit that there are many of us who feel the same way. We know of our inadequacies and often doubt that God can use people like us. We do not doubt the Lord's greatness, but we are also acquainted with our own unworthiness. We, like Peter, fear that our failures have somehow disqualified us.

ROOTS, FAILURE, AND COMPARISON

I want to address three issues as we consider Peter's self-discovery in John 21. One has to do with his roots. Peter grew up in a fisherman's home and was himself skilled at his trade. Much of his training and identity revolved around being an effective workman at the craft he had learned. As a result of it, he had standing in the community. When we are in the midst of self-doubt it is easy to gravitate towards the things in which we feel competent and give us a niche. At this point, Peter desired that comfortable familiarity.

The second issue is Peter's failure. Jesus dealt very directly with the terrible night of failure when Peter denied him three times. We will see how the Lord took Peter directly back to the time when he most publicly and painfully fell flat on his face.

The third which Peter needed help with was his desire to compare himself with other people. When we struggle with our own value, we can compare ourselves to other people in the areas of our past or our destiny. That will raise itself as an issue for Peter as well.

We will direct our study in John 21 to Peter's roots, his failure, and his tendency to compare. Beginning in verse 1:

Afterward Jesus appeared again to his disciples by the Sea of Tiberias. It happened this way: Simon Peter, Thomas (called Didymus), Nathanael from Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two other disciples were together. "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.

Early in the morning, Jesus stood on the shore, but the disciples did not realize that it was Jesus.

He called out to them, "Friends, haven't you caught any fish?"

"No," they answered.

He 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.

Then 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.

The other disciples followed in the boat, towing the net full of fish, for they were not far from shore, about a hundred yards. When they landed, they saw a fire of burning coals there with fish on it, and some bread.

Jesus said to them, "Bring some of the fish you have just caught."

Simon Peter climbed aboard and dragged the net ashore. It was full of large fish, 153, but even with so many the net was not torn. Jesus said to them, "Come and have breakfast" None of the disciples dared ask him, "Who are you?" They knew it was the Lord. Jesus came, took the bread, and gave it to them, and did the same with the fish. This was now the third time Jesus appeared to his disciples after he was raised from the dead.

FAMILIARITY AND ACCOMPLISHMENT

Let us consider the role fishing played in Peter's life. The disciples were told to wait for Pentecost when power would come upon them. Back in Galilee, Peter said, "I'm going fishing." The other six disciples that were with him also went along. Part of the apostle's desire to go fishing might have been the desire for activity and companionship while he was waiting for promised plan to unfold. In addition, it might have been borne out of an economic need to provide for his family. However, another motive was its familiarity to him. At this period of time, when Peter's recent failure loomed large in his thinking, I believe he wanted to do something to remind him of his natural talent, effectiveness, and past success. So Peter and his friends set off to fish.

Although there is nothing morally wrong with Peter's choice, it posed a temptation. We need to be careful that we do not try to answer the longings for wellbeing and the need for self-worth by merely doing what we are humanly good at.

Our family saw a film last week called "Field of Dreams" that makes a similar point that I would like to stress here. It centers on the rift that had developed between a father and son and the heartbreak that ensued. Their love of baseball was the common denominator which brought them together to resolve their conflict. The movie is effective drama (not theology) because for many in our culture baseball--America's pastime--is an important part of growing up. On the surface, baseball has impacted my own experience in family life. When my father took me to Wrigley Field in Chicago as a young boy, I remember how much I enjoyed being with him in that setting. My wife grew up next door to Bill Rigney, who managed the Giants at that time. As a result, she went to dozens of games a year with his daughter, and is still an avid fan. My own children have played baseball and we all enjoy rooting for the Giants and A's.

Good memories and warm fellowship can gather around activities like baseball and fishing. Yet the problem with relying on familiarity is that it cannot meet the needs of the heart. It cannot take away guilt and shame, and it does not help us answer the question of failure and inadequacy with which we all struggle. At some level, I think that was what Peter was hoping would happen when he went fishing. The Lord, however, did not allow him to catch any fish.

This is the second time that Jesus taught Peter a lesson about fishing. In Luke 5, a similar scene took place at the beginning of Peter's walk with Christ. In both instances Christ displayed his Lordship over creation, and indicated to the fishermen that his presence was required to make life work even in the ordinary and routine things.

In John 21, Jesus moved from the imagery of fishing to the imagery of shepherding sheep, taking care of people. In our own experience, we need to be certain that our identity is not determined by how we make our living. Rather, the purpose of our position in the workplace is to serve the Lord as his representative. Our wellbeing must not be ultimately derived from our accomplishments in engineering, sales, or production with our hands. That will not sustain us. When Peter's heart confused him, I think he had to learn that fishing would not meet his inner longing for adequacy by itself.

REMAKING FAILURE

Continuing in John 21:15:

When they had finished eating, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon son of John, do you truly love me more than these?"

The question might be translated, "Do you love me more than these six men around us?" That was important for Jesus to ask. Before the crucifixion Peter had spoken in his usual bravado about how his love and commitment to Christ was greater than that of his brothers. Matthew 26:35 says:

"Jesus told them, "This very night you will all fall away on account of me." [This is immediately before the crucifixion] For it is written, 'The sheep of the flock will be scattered.' But after I have risen I will go ahead of you into Galilee." Peter replied, "Even if all will fall away on account of you, I never will."

The night the Lord was betrayed, Peter had said in effect, "I love you more than these, Jesus." Jesus turned to him and said, "I promise you tonight, Peter, that before the cock crows you will have denied me three times." In the gospel accounts Peter vehemently denied the Lord when accused by a little girl around a fire in the high priest's courtyard. While others joined the chorus of accusation, he began to stomp and swear, "No, I don't know him. I have nothing to do with him. I am no friend of his." Peter would live with his denial forever. The Scriptures will remain, and the account of Peter's denial will never fade. For all of his claims of allegiance to Christ, he lacked courage in the face of the prevailing Roman and Jewish threat.

Just as Peter denied Christ three times, we will hear the risen Jesus question Peter three times about his love for the Lord. In doing so, Jesus overturned Peter's history. The question began, "Do you love me more than these?" Reminded of his statements before, Peter did not rank himself with anyone else, but humbly replied.

"Yes, Lord, you know that I love you." Jesus said, "Feed my lambs." Again Jesus said, "Simon son of John, do you truly love me?"

He answered, "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you."

Jesus said, "Take care of my sheep."

The 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. I tell you the truth, 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!"

Peter turned and saw that the disciple whom Jesus loved was following them. (This was the one who had leaned back against Jesus at the supper and had said, "Lord, who is going to betray you?") When Peter saw him, he asked, "Lord, what about him?"

Jesus answered, "If I want him to remain alive until I return, what is that to you? You must follow me."

"YOU KNOW I LOVE YOU"

There are details here on which we should comment. First of all, in asking Peter about his love the first two times, Jesus used the Greek word "*agape*." Peter, however, answered in a different word, "*phileo*." Both words are translated into English as "love," yet they are different words in Greek. Thus, the New International Version says, "Do you truly love me?" in an attempt to translate *agape*.

The third time, Jesus finally used Peter's own word, *phileo*. Each time Peter answered, "Yes, Lord, you know that I *phileo* (love) you." There are a number of possibilities here. I think that Peter was accepting humility in a way that he had never accepted it before. His answer was more humble than the question asked. He did not respond, "I love you more than these," as he had before. He did not even use the stronger term *agape* to answer.

The second thing to note is that Peter did not try to prove his love. He did not say, "I love you," and qualify it with a string of adjectives about how much he loved him. He rested his case on Christ's knowledge of him. He essentially said "Lord, I don't know if I can even answer fully about myself, but you know me and know in my heart of hearts that I love you. I'm counting on the fact that you can see what is inside of me. Despite what I have done, you know that I love you." Peter's statement revealed his confidence of God's intimate knowledge of him rather than in his own self-confidence.

Another valuable point to make about this interview is that it does not concern performance. Jesus did not ask Peter how he had rectified his failure. He did not ask him about his preaching or his organizational leadership. The key to this reestablished and life-giving relationship with God had everything to do with Peter's love and commitment to God. Obedience and service would emanate from there. Thus, at the foundation was Jesus' question, "Do you love me?" Peter was able to affirm, "You know all things, you know that I love you."

We are certain that Jesus accepted Peter's assertion of love because the Lord gave him a responsibility. Based on Peter's repeated answer, the Lord said in effect, "I want you to take care of my little ones, my lambs. I want you to care for the people that matter to me. You are not basically a catcher of fish, Peter. Rather, you are to be a shepherd of God's people."

Thus, the Lord accepted Peter's answers by giving him a mission. It is important for us to see that, since too many of our contemporaries think about getting well from tragedy and personal failure in terms of psychoanalysis. They wade around in their past, attend to themselves, and ruminate in the details of it all. Jesus does not deal with Peter like that. He said, "Peter, do you love me? Then you have my permission to live a life of service. Instead of having to live in a past that you cannot change, I give you freedom to do good to others." There is nothing more healing than a life given in service to Christ.

PETER'S COURAGE

The last point to make about this interview is Jesus' revelation that Peter would suffer. Jesus is a bit enigmatic, but I am sure that the apostle understood the revelation that he would die a violent death. Tradition teaches that Peter was convicted as a felon in the cause of Christianity, and died by crucifixion in Rome. However, he announced himself unworthy of dying in the same manner as Christ, and asked to be crucified upside down, a more painful execution.

Do you see what the Lord was doing for Peter? Thinking back to the night of Jesus' trial, the word "coward" bombarded his mind. He felt himself worthless as a result of his failure to pledge loyalty to Jesus in the face of a little girl's accusations. The Lord said, "You are not a coward, Peter. The day is coming when you will bravely face a death that is honorable to you and glorifying to me."

This entire discussion was the Lord's way of taking Peter's tragic night and giving him a second chance, of reshaping it in an entirely different way. Peter was allowed to declare "I love you" three times instead of denying Jesus three times. Instead of a life time known as a coward the Lord predicted a lifetime of courage and service for him, setting Peter on his feet to minister to people again.

Peter's uncertainty about himself could not be remedied by his competence as a fisherman. Neither did his weakness on the night of Jesus' trial define who he was. The Lord gave him a chance to recover his past so that he did not have to live with the identity as a coward. He could carry with him the memory of Jesus' acceptance, his statement of love.

The last point is Peter's question about John ("the disciple whom Jesus loved"). I think one of Peter's problems was his tendency to measure himself against other people. We are prone to that as well. Don't we find it easy when we have self-doubt to measure ourselves in relationship to other people? We can make a string of comparisons: Are we doing better than they? Has our Christian assignment been fulfilled more effectively than their's?

The Lord rebuked Peter's way of thinking by saying that it was none of his business, he would do with his servant John as he pleased. Peter was not allowed input on John's destiny. Twice the Lord said in the simplest of phrases, "You follow me." That was the disciple's responsibility.

There's no advantage to comparisons, finding our identity in our roots, or embracing our failure. We need to let Jesus reshape our failures into a new identity based in who he says we are, his servants. Peter's uncertainty about himself and his struggle to believe that the future would be as Jesus predicted was complex. But the Lord's answer was simple: I have a ministry for you, Peter. I have forgiveness and remaking for you. What you need to do is follow me.

The same simple answer can be found in Christ's proclamation to us. We must not look for competency in our roots, survey our failure, or compare ourselves to others. Rather, we must allow him minister to us and respond by following him.

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