

THE SEARCH FOR PURPOSE

SERIES: ONE TO ONE

By Danny Hall

There's a question that I like to put forth from time to time, because it's one that I ask myself fairly often: "Why are you here?" When you're sliding deep into middle age, you ask yourself questions like, "Does my life mean anything? Does it have any purpose?" I think it's important for us to ask these questions, because it's so easy to get distracted and off track. We can ask of our church, "Why is this collection of people plopped down in this place at this time? Is there any purpose to this?" Perhaps you have asked yourself such questions at points along your way.

In this series in the Gospel of John, we've been looking at some stories in which Jesus interacts with individuals. In this sixth and final message we're going to skip to the end of the book, to a time when Jesus meets one-on-one with Peter. Peter is at a point in his life when perhaps he's asking such questions, too. This is after Jesus' death and resurrection, and it's not certain what's going to happen next. So Peter is trying to figure out where his life is going. John 21:15-25:

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

"Yes, Lord," he said, "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.” Because of this, the rumor spread among the brothers that this disciple would not die. But Jesus did not say that he would not die; he only said, “If I want him to remain alive until I return, what is that to you?”

This is the disciple who testifies to these things and who wrote them down.

We know that his testimony is true.

Jesus did many other things as well. If every one of them were written down, I suppose that even the whole world would not have room for the books that would be written.

This story takes place at the very end of Jesus’ earthly life and ministry. For Peter this time after the resurrection is very significant. While he experienced great failure before the crucifixion of Jesus, I’m sure his heart is incredibly gladdened to see that Jesus has risen from the dead, and a great peacefulness has come over him. But I believe there is some question in his mind as to what that means for the future. What’s going to happen next?

So Peter goes back to what he knows. In the verses preceding our text we find him among a group of the disciples by the seaside. Peter looks around, trying to figure out what to do, and he settles on what comes naturally: “I’m going out fishing.”

He goes out with a couple of others. But they don't catch anything. In a reprise of a miracle that happened at the very beginning of Jesus' ministry, when he was first calling the disciples (Luke 5:4-11), Jesus walks out onto the shore and tells them to throw the nets on the other side of the boat. When they do that, there's an enormous catch of 153 large fish. Jesus eventually cooks breakfast for them, and they have a time of fellowship together. Then Jesus takes Peter off to the side and has this one-on-one conversation that we've just read. This is the third time John records that Jesus has appeared to his disciples after his resurrection.

I've divided this encounter that Peter has with Jesus into three parts, each of which reveals a path that Jesus is taking.

The preparation for obedience

Peter is going to find it difficult to follow Jesus after all that has transpired in the last few days, or perhaps weeks. So the path Jesus now leads Peter along begins with the preparation for a deeper obedience that will last him a lifetime.

There are two interpretive problems that people debate in this passage. Jesus asks Peter, "Do you love me more than these?" The first problem is, what does the word "these" refer to? A couple of interpretations have been posited over the years. The first is the most obvious in this context: it's the fish. The fishing waters are what Peter knows. They're his security and comfort, the place

where he feels most at home. There are fish all through this story. So maybe Jesus is saying to him, “Peter, do you love me more than these fish?”

The other interpretation that has been posited is that “these” refers to the other disciples. “Do you love me more than these other disciples do?” I myself believe that Jesus is speaking about the disciples, because of the greater context, and because of what Jesus is doing in Peter’s life.

Let’s remember what happened right before Jesus went to the cross. Jesus was with his disciples that night. Among the things he said to them was that they would all fall away. Remember Peter’s answer? “Even if all fall away on account of you, I never will” (Matthew 26:31-34; Mark 14:27-30). Jesus looked at him and said, “I tell you the truth, this very night, before the rooster crows, you will disown me three times.” Peter didn’t believe it. But despite his bravado and absolute assurance, just as Jesus said, he disowned him three times.

Now, before we get too critical of Peter, we have to understand that his claim that he would never forsake Jesus was coming from a very good place. He had grown to love Jesus, whom he had followed for more than three years. He had walked away from his whole life to follow Jesus. He was a true disciple of Jesus’, and he loved him a lot. As much as Peter understood, with his whole heart, he was ready to follow Jesus. But then the moment of pressure came, and with it the moment of denial, and Peter failed three times in succession. To me, the best understanding of Jesus’ question is that it points back to this episode.

The second interpretive problem in this text concerns the word “love” in Jesus’ repeated question, “Do you love me?” There are two different Greek words for “love” used in the three times Jesus asks. Some people have made a lot out of the difference between the two words. But I do not believe it is very significant, because in other places John has used these words interchangeably (and the conversation originally took place in Aramaic anyway, not Greek). What I think is significant is the parallel between Peter’s denials of Jesus and Jesus’ restoration. Peter denied Jesus three times, and now Jesus asks him three times, “Do you really love me?” And on the third time, when it says Peter is hurt, I think his sadness comes from the incredible understanding of his own failure. He says, “Yes, Lord, I love you,” knowing now how easy it was for him to disown Jesus in the hour of need. He recognizes the failure that he is capable of in his own strength. Even when he wanted to serve the Lord and follow him, and he was ready to do anything that was asked of him, he failed.

But Jesus’ taking Peter back through that by asking him this question three times is located in a wonderful place in the greater story, between what Jesus taught Peter the last night they were together before his death, and what is about to happen to Peter a few days hence. On that last evening that Jesus was with the disciples (John 14-16, the Upper Room Discourse), Jesus prepared the disciples for two great realities: he would no longer be with them physically as he had been for more than three years, and they were the ones who were going to be in charge. Both of those truths would have been quite difficult for them to handle. That he would no longer be physically with them would have been frightening, disillusioning, and discouraging. And that they then were going to be in charge of this movement that Jesus had launched would have been intimidating. But throughout that teaching, Jesus promised them that if he went away, he would

return, and he promised that the Holy Spirit would come. Both of those promises were to be fulfilled on the day of Pentecost. The Holy Spirit would come, and Jesus' presence would be real among them again through the power of the Holy Spirit.

On the path from this teaching to its fulfillment Jesus takes Peter from confidence in himself to brokenness. Peter needs to realize that in his own strength he can't do this. But just a few days hence, Peter himself will be filled with the Holy Spirit in a life-changing moment in which his obedience will be taken deeper.

I love this story about Peter, because I've been there so many times. We've all said many times, "Yes, I'm really going to follow the Lord; I want to do the right thing," only to run head-on into the brick wall of our own impotence to do it, even though in our heart we know we want to. And Jesus reveals to Peter the brokenness of his heart over his inability to do what he longs to do, in anticipation, I believe, of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit that will enable him, through God's very presence within him, to do the things his heart desires.

Let's look at the second part of Peter's encounter with Jesus.

The call to obedience

In the midst of preparing the way by exposing Peter's brokenness, the futility of his own efforts to follow Jesus, Jesus calls Peter to obey him. Every time he asks the question, "Do you love

me?” he says, “Feed my sheep.” He means, “Take care of the people I bring into your sphere of influence. Nurture them.” He gives Peter work to do. He doesn’t look at Peter and say, “Well, of course you don’t love me, since you screwed it all up!” He doesn’t reject Peter. No, he asks Peter to participate in his work in building his kingdom.

This restoration process also includes a rather cryptic promise of future success. Verse 18 is one of the strangest verses in all of Scripture. Jesus says, “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.” John, commenting some fifty or sixty years later, looks back and says, “Jesus said this to indicate the kind of death by which Peter would glorify God.” From this perspective John has seen Peter restored, has seen his life and ministry from this point on all played out.

We have no clear idea how much of that statement Peter understands at this time, but obviously Jesus is promising Peter a beautiful thing. He’s not just predicting the manner of his death, he is promising that Peter, who denied him three times, and is now broken and sad, will one day offer up his life for his Lord. When the outpouring of God’s Holy Spirit comes, which will empower and energize him, the Peter who once cowered before a slave girl will be the one who preaches boldly in the temple courts, the one who is jailed many times, the one who lives out his life in faithful service to the Lord (with ups and downs, failures and victories, of course), to the point that he is willing to die for the Lord. So in this cryptic statement, Jesus is telling him, “I’m going to take you forward on this journey. You’re going to live your life for my glory, and one day you’ll even give your life for me.”

Then he sums up the whole call to obedience in the simple phrase: “Follow me.” Now, we can dress up the Christian life with all kinds of fancy language, program it out, build all kinds of structures to do it, but at the end of the day, it’s about those two words, “Follow me.” Wherever Jesus takes you, whatever he asks of you, follow him.

The third part of this encounter reminds me of why I love Peter so much.

The challenge to obedience

Think of it: here’s this beautiful, sweet moment at the sea. Peter’s heart has been broken because he’s been reminded that he failed Jesus, but Jesus has reached out and forgiven him, called him back to follow him, invited him to participate in the work of building his kingdom. But what’s the first thing Peter does? He screws up again! John is an older man now, looking back at how all of this has played out. He remembers that he himself was a little way off when this conversation between Jesus and Peter was going on. And the first thing Peter does after this wonderful restoration from Jesus is look over at John and say, “What about him?” Already he’s distracted. But Jesus says, “If I want him to remain alive until I return, what is that to you?”

It’s a beautiful part of our calling from Jesus that it is a unique role for us to play. One of the ways that our obedience to Jesus is challenged is that we get easily distracted, and often by what God is doing with everybody else. Now, it is absolutely true that we live out our faith in

community. What I do and how I live my life does affect yours, and what you do affects mine. But our calling to follow Jesus is unique, because we are uniquely gifted, and our stories are unique. God has brought us along unique pathways to get us to where we are today. Our past histories, our personalities, our spiritual gifting in Christ, everything about us makes each of us a unique person in God's kingdom. So Jesus' call to each of us is, "Follow me. Focus on me."

One of the things that trips me up a lot in my walk with the Lord, and perhaps it does you, is what I call, humanly speaking, The Colossal Unfairness of It All. Why does Jake get to sing so well, and I don't? Why doesn't So-and-So seem to have the same problems that I have? Why is my child not as smart as that family's child? Why does my wife have this illness? Why I am I having to go through this? There's this sense that somehow God ought to make it all fair in our eyes. But Jesus keeps saying to us, "What is it to you what calling I have for that person? Follow me." God calls us to trust in his sovereign plan for our lives.

You and I are going to constantly be distracted, as Peter was on this occasion. We don't always like the way God works. Peter didn't. But Jesus draws Peter out of distraction to engagement, being able to say, "Lord, whatever the cost, whatever you ask, regardless of whatever happens to So-and-So, I just want to follow you." And what an enormous step of faith that is for you and me!

Jesus takes Peter from self-confidence to brokenness, from brokenness to participation, and then from distraction to full engagement. And Peter will become a leader. He'll be the one who opens the door to preaching the gospel to the Gentiles. He'll be the one to do all kinds of amazing and

new things, energized and empowered by God's Holy Spirit, as he simply follows the Lord, wherever that takes him.

We started off in this series with the woman at the well, a woman of ill repute and an outcast, a Samaritan, the lowest of the low in the eyes of the Jews. It would be hard to find someone more marginalized than she was. Then we looked at Nicodemus, a Pharisee, one of the highest of the high, occupying a place of importance, a recognized scholar in the Scriptures, a leader in the community, who nevertheless had a deep need. Then we saw a man by the pool at Bethesda who had been there for thirty-eight years, an invalid. Next was a woman taken in adultery and publicly shamed to put Jesus to the test. Finally we saw a man born blind who was miraculously healed by Jesus. Those are all wonderful and beautiful stories. I've invited you in each message to enter into the story and consider how you might be like someone in it, and how Jesus might touch your life. I hope that's happened for you.

But I think this story about Peter is one of the great stories in the New Testament. It's one of my favorites. The reason I picked it as the last story in our series is that it's the one that's most like us. Most of us want to serve Jesus. We placed our faith in him, we follow him, and then we struggle with it. We get distracted. We get caught up in things we think are more important. The truth is, at the point of his denial, Peter loved his own life and his reputation more than he loved Jesus. And whether it's fishing, skiing, family, children, reputation, money, safety, or whatever it might be, it is so easy for us to set our affections on something other than Jesus. Then when we try to follow him, it's so easy to ask why our life is not like this other person's life. But Jesus' resounding call keeps coming back: "Follow me!"

This story is also like us because we keep thinking, “I’m just going to try a little harder.” But each time we do that, we run up against a stone wall, and it gets us nowhere. We have to be broken by it so that God can direct us to the wonderful, life-transforming power of the Holy Spirit who resides within us.

This is what it means to find freedom: to trust God’s Spirit and follow Christ wherever he will lead us. God brings us into the larger story of what he’s doing, gives us meaningful things to do in the work of his kingdom as we’re empowered by his Holy Spirit. He calls us to a life of faithfulness in the power of the Holy Spirit, his own presence within us. So in between the teaching and the realization, there’s brokenness, followed by trust that allows us to walk with the Lord.

Now, this story is not given to us to make us feel guilty. It’s given to us to make us feel hopeful. We are all like Peter, trying our best, wanting to love Jesus, getting it wrong, needing God’s forgiveness, needing the power of his Holy Spirit, needing in our brokenness to trust him and walk forward. And just as he gave that cryptic promise to Peter, he gives us the same promise. He’s going to take us forward, do great things in and through our lives. We can follow him. He’s given us everything we need—the power of the Holy Spirit, the beauty of his word to instruct us, the glorious community of faith to encourage us. He calls us to look at him and say, “I will follow Jesus.”

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John 21:15-25

Sixth Message

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[Back to Index page](#)

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