

HOW MUCH DO YOU LOVE JESUS?

John 21:15-19

This passage gives us an opportunity to look closely at the meaning of the Resurrection for the Apostle Peter and how his particular circumstances are so closely related to ours.

It is said that the young son of Bishop Berkeley once asked him the question, "*Papa, what do the words, 'Cherubim and Seraphim' mean?*" The bishop took time to tell the little questioner that Cherubim was a Hebrew word meaning knowledge, and the word Seraphim stood for flame, explaining that it is commonly supposed the **Cherubim** are angels that excel in knowledge and the **Seraphim** are those who excel in love for God.

"*Then I hope,*" the boy said, "*that when I die I will be a Seraphim. I'd a lot rather love God than to know everything.*"¹

How much do you love God and Jesus? Well that is the question Jesus asked Peter shortly after Peter had denied the Lord when He was arrested. Peter's answer and Jesus' response provides one of the greatest examples of love in all history. Let us listen in on the beginning of their conversation.

John 21:15-17 (NASB):

¹⁵ *So when they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon, son of John, do you love Me more than these?" He said to Him, "Yes, Lord; You know that I love You." He said to him, "**Tend My lambs.**"*

¹⁶ *He said to him again a second time, "Simon, son of John, do you love Me?" He said to Him, "Yes, Lord; You know that I love You." He said to him, "**Shepherd My sheep.**"*

¹⁷ *He said to him the third time, "Simon, son of John, do you love Me?" Peter was grieved because He said to him the third time, "Do you love Me?" And he said to Him, "**Lord, You know all things;** You know that I love You." Jesus said to him, "**Tend My sheep.**"*

Think about what was going on here. Here is the God of the universe serving breakfast to His apostles. It was kind of like a cookout with Jesus working the grill. Jesus never considered any kind of service to others to be humiliating. In fact, He thoroughly enjoyed serving. Anyone who claims to be a follower of Christ should also enjoy serving others.

¹ Tan, Paul Lee: *Encyclopedia of 7700 Illustrations : A Treasury of Illustrations, Anecdotes, Facts and Quotations for Pastors, Teachers and Christian Workers.* Garland TX : Bible Communications, 1996, c1979.

Some commentators maintain that after breakfast Jesus probably took Peter aside away from the others to talk privately with him, or perhaps took him for a walk along the beach. But we do not see that. We have checked a number of Bible translations and there is not a hint in any of them that Jesus took Peter away from the group to speak with him privately. We must take the Bible for what it says and never try to add anything to it. There are occasions, however, when we need to look at everything the Bible has to say about a specific subject or event, and then come to a conclusion based on all the evidence within the context in which it was presented.

You may recall that at the Last Supper Jesus and Peter had the following conversation:

Luke 22:31-34 (NASB):

³¹ *"Simon, Simon, behold, Satan has demanded permission to sift you like wheat;*

³² *but I have prayed for you, that your faith may not fail; and you, when once you have turned again, strengthen your brothers."*

³³ *But he said to Him, "Lord, with You I am ready to go both to prison and to death!"*

³⁴ *And He said, "I say to you, Peter, the rooster will not crow today until you have denied three times that you know Me."*

It would certainly seem that Jesus knew that Satan was going to be allowed to tempt Peter into betraying Jesus, and that Peter would actually give into that temptation because Jesus had been praying for Peter that after such a cowardly failure, Peter would come back stronger than ever to strengthen his brothers, Jesus' followers. And this is exactly what is about to happen at this very moment. Jesus was simply about to prove to the other apostles that Peter was now well qualified to lead them. What a marvelous story. Something only God is capable of coming up with. That is yet another reason we believe Jesus addressed Peter in the presence of the others, just as He had done at the Last Supper. All of these men would benefit to see the transformation of the man who would now lead them when Jesus had returned to Heaven.

Peter very likely was still feeling some guilt about betraying the Lord when Jesus was arrested and tried. Add to that the fact that Jesus must have been recognizably different and perhaps even somewhat intimidating to Peter because of Jesus' resurrected appearance. How would you feel if Jesus came along and sat down with you and your friends and began questioning you about the worst sin you ever committed? I would be a wreck thinking that I might do something to displease Him while also thinking about the boatload of sins I have committed that I know He knows about. Then there would be the shame I would feel in front of my friends thinking that perhaps Jesus would humiliate and punish me for my cowardice and betrayal of Him. However, remember that Peter and the others had not been given the Holy Spirit as yet, and without the power of the Holy Spirit at work in any believer, we are defenseless against a frontal assault by Satan. What, then, does Jesus do?

Well, they were all sitting around the fire after breakfast, when Jesus said to Peter, "Simon." (This was the name that Peter had before Jesus made him an apostle.) It seems that Jesus was reminding him in a not too subtle way that his behavior the night Jesus was arrested was very much like that of a person who is not a follower of Jesus. "Simon, do you love me more than these?" What does Jesus mean here by "these?" Is He referring to the boat, the net, and everything that is connected with Peter's love for fishing? Is Jesus referring to whether Peter loves Him more than he loves the other apostles? Or could He mean, "Do you love me more than these other men love me?" We believe it is the latter, that Jesus is asking Peter if he loves Him more than the others do. Jesus is setting the stage here for Peter's forgiveness and for him to be entrusted with caring for the others after Jesus ascends to Heaven. You see, the old Peter who claimed not to know Christ the night Jesus was arrested was somewhat of a boastful controller who liked to write his own press releases. He often boasted of his faith and the things he would do if ever placed in various kinds of situations. He was what some might call a braggart.

Jesus wanted to see if Peter's experience and failures had changed him and I believe he wanted the others to see it as well. You see Peter's **pride** had quite frequently gotten in the way of what all Christ followers are expected to develop, and that is a sense of **humility**. This humility was to include a dependence and trust in Christ in order to accomplish His purposes rather than their depending on their own ability to do things on their own. Do you remember what Peter said to Jesus just before Jesus' arrest? He had affirmed that he would lay down his life for Christ (John 13:36-38).

At the Last Supper Peter volunteered that he loved Jesus so much that he would die for Him, but he had not been able to keep that promise when the chips were down. It was time for Peter to prove he was ready to be the kind of servant Christ wanted him to be. It was not that Peter needed to prove this to Jesus because Jesus knew what Peter would do. Jesus knew that Peter had to prove this to himself and to the other apostles. When Jesus asked Peter if he loved Him, Peter answered Jesus' question in John 21:15 by telling Him that he did love Him. Jesus responded by saying, "**Feed My lambs.**"

However, there is something quite interesting and worth noting in John 21:15. There are two different Greek words used for love in this verse. One is the strongest word for love that we have in the Bible, *agapao*. It is the word for a love that is absolutely unselfish and is used throughout the New Testament for God Himself: "God is love." This word is used for the love of God for this world, and for our love to God and for the people of the Lord. It is used even for the love which people sometimes put in the place of God, such as for money, and power. Unfortunately, you can give such things the love that should go to God.²

Then there is another Greek word, *phileo*, and it means affection such as exists between good friends. It is used for the love of one friend to another and for family

² H. A. Ironside, *H. A. Ironside Commentary – John*, (San Diego, CA: Horizon Press, 1942), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, 886-890.

affection. It suggests a lower quality of love than the first word. Let us look at the verse again, this time using the Greek for the words meaning love:³

¹⁵ *So when they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon, son of John, do you love (agapao) Me more than these?" He said to Him, "Yes, Lord; You know that I love (phileo) You."*

Jesus used the word for the strongest kind of love when He asked Peter if Peter loved Him. Peter responded with a word that meant a somewhat lesser kind of love.

Jesus then told Peter: "**Feed My lambs.**"⁴ Then Jesus asked Peter the same question a second time, using the same word for love that He had used the first time. Peter responded using the same word he had used for love the first time. Jesus then told Peter to shepherd His sheep.

Now, why has Peter responded to Jesus' question about his love for Jesus by using a different word for love than Jesus was using? It seems that Peter had finally realized that he had been incapable of the highest form of love to which Jesus was referring. He was now telling Jesus that he definitely loved Him but he was not about to make the mistake of boasting about capabilities that he was not sure he could fulfill.

Then Jesus asked Peter a **third time** if he loved Him, but this time Jesus used the same word Peter had used the two previous times, and Peter answered by using the same word he had used the two previous times. He also confessed to Jesus "*Lord, You know all things; You know that I love You.*" Jesus said to him, "**Tend My sheep.**"

Peter was most likely disturbed that Jesus would ask him three times if he loved Him. But how many times had Peter denied Jesus after His arrest? And when Jesus made His point the third time, He used the word for love that recognized Peter's honesty and humility. In effect, Jesus was telling Peter that He was pleased that Peter loved Him in the way he did, and that Jesus was also pleased that Peter knew he had limitations if he did not rely on the help of Jesus. It was Jesus' way to show Peter that he was forgiven and restored to his former position.

Attachment to Jesus is an absolute necessity for serving Christ in this world and the next. And in His mercy Jesus is willing to award this great privilege to a person who has a very short résumé, listing only that he or she has a very humble kind of love to offer to his/her Lord."⁵ Jesus expects nothing more.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ William Hendriksen, *Baker New Testament Commentary – Exposition of the Gospel According to John*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1953), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, 486-489.

Peter admitted that Jesus knew everything about him including all of his failures and his denial. He could have been implying that he was not worthy of Jesus' trust. Yet in spite of his failures, Jesus gave him the responsibility to look after the other apostles.⁶

The key qualification for this responsibility is a love for Jesus that is characterized by humility, dependence and obedience. Up until this present time, Peter had loved Jesus, but he was still full of himself and he kept placing himself at the head of the pack, often trying to control what the others did, and even what Jesus did. Peter thought of himself as being number one, or at least certainly wanting to be number one. Such pride in a leader would spell disaster for the community of believers, as had already been evident in Israel's history right up to those who had just had Jesus crucified. Sadly the same thing has been just as evident in the history of the Church. But Peter himself learned his lesson, as is clear from his first letter. When he addresses the elders of the communities he does so as a "*fellow elder*" and encourages them to "*be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, serving as overseers...not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock. And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that will never fade away*" (1 Peter 5:1-4). Here we see Peter exercising authority with a sense of **humility**, and He is further conscious of the supreme authority of the **Chief Shepherd**. Such are marks of a true shepherd in the service of Jesus Christ.⁷

Rodney Whitacre asks, "Have you ever thought of it, that only the smaller birds sing? You never heard a note from the eagle in all your life, nor from the turkey, nor from the ostrich. But you have heard from the canary, the wren, and the lark. The sweetest music comes from those Christians who are small in their own estimation and small before the Lord."⁸ This is the attitude Jesus was looking for in Peter, and it is the attitude He is looking for in us.

Let us think about that amazing concept for a minute. In current life, the "big birds" strut and crow and draw attention to themselves: the rich, the famous, the movie stars, athletes, politicians, and financial gurus. Yet, who gives you comfort, encouragement, and inspiration? In our congregation it is the Kathryns and the Dallases who lift our spirits. How? Because they are the ones who praise God, no matter what their circumstances. They are the ones we can count on to pray for us in difficult times. They are the canaries with beautiful, inspiring songs who lift their hearts, and also ours, in worship to our great Lord God. I daresay God's ears are tuned to hear those songs rather than all the crowing of the so-called "big birds" in the world.

⁶ op Cit., Ironside.

⁷ Rodney A. Whitacre, *The IVP New Testament Commentary Series – John*, ed. Grant R. Osborne (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, 494-497.

⁸ Tan, Paul Lee: *Encyclopedia of 7700 Illustrations : A Treasury of Illustrations, Anecdotes, Facts and Quotations for Pastors, Teachers and Christian Workers*. Garland TX : Bible Communications, 1996, c1979.

At the Last Supper Jesus had predicted Peter's denials after Peter had said he was willing to die with Him (John 13:37-38). Jesus told him, "Where I am going, you cannot follow now, but you will follow later" (John 13:36). Here now is the call to follow. After Peter professes his obedient love, Jesus spells out the cost of that love.⁹

So Peter was publicly restored to the position he had before he betrayed Jesus, and he was given additional responsibility as well. We believe **William Hendriksen** puts it very well when he says:

“It is as if the Master says to Peter: ‘Simon, you were weak like a lamb, wandering like a sheep, yet, throughout it all, you, like a dear ("little") sheep, were the object of my tender and loving solicitude. Now, having profited by your experiences (because of your sincere sorrow), consider the members of my Church to be your lambs, and feed them; your sheep, and shepherd them; yes, your dear sheep, and in feeding them love them! Do not neglect the work among the flock, Simon. That is your real assignment! Go back to it! Thus was Peter fully and publicly restored.”^{10 11}

We will now go on to John 21:18-19 (NASB):

¹⁸ *"Truly, truly, I say to you, when you were younger, you used to gird yourself and walk wherever you wished; but when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands and someone else will gird you, and bring you where you do not wish to go."*

¹⁹ *Now this He said, signifying by what kind of death he would glorify God. And when He had spoken this, He said to him, "Follow Me!"*

Now let us also take a look at a more contemporary translation, as this is a difficult passage to understand.

John 21:18-19 (NLT):

¹⁸ *"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."*

¹⁹ *Jesus said this to let him know by what kind of death he would glorify God. Then Jesus told him, "Follow me."*

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ op Cit., Hendriksen.

¹¹ The metaphorical meaning of *feeding*—especially, as far as the character of the food is concerned—is explained in the following passages: Deut. 8:3; Job 23:12; Ps. 119:103; Isa. 55:1, 2; Jer. 3:15; 15:16; John 6:33-35, 51, 58; I Cor. 3:2; 10:3, 4; I Peter 2:2; and Rev. 2:7, 17.

Jesus provided Peter a glimpse into his future. Peter had boasted to Jesus that he was willing to die for Him (John 13:37) and that is just what he was going to be required to do. Jesus continued, “*When you were young, Peter, you went your own way, but when you get old you are going to be bound with chains and taken to prison and put to death for Me.*” This is just what happened about the year A.D. 68, for Peter was in prison for Christ's sake and he was taken out and put to death. Church tradition records that Peter suffered martyrdom under Nero (around a.d. 67-68).

At the time of the crucifixion, Peter, along with the majority of the disciples, had fled the scene. Jesus had to bear the penalty of sin on the cross alone. Now that the penalty had been paid in full, Jesus informed Peter of his own eventual martyrdom. Peter would be a prisoner, forced to walk a path that he did not want to walk. He would stretch out his hands, even as Jesus had done.

William Hendriksen comments, “When they were going to nail him to a cross, Peter said, ‘*No, no! My Lord died like that. I am not worthy to die as He did.*’ And he said, ‘*Hang me on that cross head downward.*’ Oh, yes; Peter loved Christ, and he really intended to be true to Him, but he forgot that the spirit can be willing when the flesh is weak. But in later years he was given grace to do as he had promised.”¹² That grace was provided by the presence of the Holy Spirit.

From this point on, Peter’s life would glorify his Lord, and his death would bring glory to the Savior who had bought Him and paid the penalty for His sin. M.R. DeHaan tells the following story:

“Years ago I was called to the home of a widow whose daughter was the apple of her eye. When the child was 3 years old she became very ill, and the doctors said that she would die. We can all understand the shock of this news, but we cannot justify the mother’s reaction. She rebelled violently and accused God of cruelty—like the Israelites in Exodus 17:3. She demanded that the Lord spare her daughter and told Him she could never trust Him again if He did not do so. Well, God granted the request, in spite of the doctors’ predictions. The child grew up and lived a normal life for 13 years, but then joined with bad companions. Finally, the girl broke her mother’s heart when at the age of 17 she fell into real trouble.

“The tragic end of the story was told me by the weeping woman when I arrived at her home that morning. “My Janie is dead—a suicide. Last night she hung herself in her room!” After minutes of convulsive sobbing she concluded, “O Doctor, how I wish God had taken her when she was 3 years old.”¹³

¹² Op. cit., Hendriksen.

¹³ Tan, Paul Lee: *Encyclopedia of 7700 Illustrations : A Treasury of Illustrations, Anecdotes, Facts and Quotations for Pastors, Teachers and Christian Workers.* Garland TX : Bible Communications, 1996, c1979.

We must submit ourselves to God's will, not try to change it. This is a tragic story, but perhaps it answers those who ask the question, "*How could God let little children die?*" God knows the future and often He protects the little ones from later tragedy by taking them home to Heaven at a very early age. When this girl reached the age of 17 she was on her own, and if she had not accepted Christ as her Savior, and it sounds like she did not, then she is now in Hell. But if a child dies before reaching the age of maturity, God takes that little one to Heaven even if he or she has not yet come to faith in Christ. How do we know that? Because David made it clear when he was speaking of his infant son who had died (2 Samuel 12:23).

Peter's life would demonstrate a complete reversal of the man he was in his youth. Strong-headed, strong-willed, impetuous Peter would become the submissive servant of his Lord, enduring ridicule and crucifixion. Only this time, Peter would not run. He would not hide. He would never again deny Jesus. He was crucified upside down, because he refused to be crucified like Jesus.¹⁴

Christians sometimes worry about how they might respond under religious persecution. We may be confident that the Holy Spirit within us has the power to prevent us from caving in to what would be a betrayal and renunciation of the Lord God, Jesus Christ.

Peter became a changed man and servant of the Lord. Listen to the instructions he gave others in 1 Peter 5:1-5 NAS:

¹ *Therefore, I exhort the elders among you, as your fellow elder and witness of the sufferings of Christ, and a partaker also of the glory that is to be revealed,*

² *shepherd the flock of God among you, exercising oversight not under compulsion, but voluntarily, according to the will of God; and not for sordid gain, but with eagerness;*

³ *nor yet as lording it over those allotted to your charge, but proving to be examples to the flock.*

⁴ *And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory.*

⁵ *You younger men, likewise, be subject to your elders; and all of you, **clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, for God is opposed to the proud, but gives grace to the humble.***

Such change can come to all who submit their lives completely to the Holy Spirit of God. Listen to what the psalmist says in Psalm 103:11-14 NAS:

¹¹ *For as high as the heavens are above the earth, So great is His lovingkindness toward those who fear Him.*

¹² *As far as the east is from the west, So far has He removed our*

¹⁴ *Easy-to-Read Commentary Series – John: The Word Made Flesh, (Holiday, FL: Green Key Books, 2004), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, 613-614.*

transgressions from us.

¹³ Just as a father has compassion on his children, So the Lord has compassion on those who fear Him.

¹⁴ For He Himself knows our frame; He is mindful that we are but dust.

Jesus had asked Peter twice if his love for Him was all consuming. With his recent denials still fresh in his own mind, Peter refused to make such a declaration again. He now knew his own weakness. He knew the hollowness of such empty boasts that could be shattered to pieces when circumstances placed him in situations that he had thus far not been able to handle. Finally, Jesus asked Peter if he loved Him even though he could fall into sin at any time and fail the Lord again. In an emotional outburst, born of guilt and shame, Peter told Jesus that He was now well aware of his human frailties that limited him from being what He knew Jesus wanted of him, and in spite of those frailties, He loved Jesus and was ready to serve Him and obey Him. Immediately Jesus told Peter to “*Tend my sheep.*”

With all of the frailty of Peter’s human devotion, Jesus did not hesitate to trust Him with a valuable role in His kingdom.¹⁵

We bet each one of you can identify here with Peter. How many times in our own lives, have we boasted about something and then been humiliated because we could not accomplish what we said we could? How many times have we said, “*Please Lord, if you get me out of this mess, I will never do it again?*” Just like Peter, our claims about what we will do in any given situation evaporate before our eyes. In such situations, Jesus comes to us and says, “*Do you love Me?*” So we know exactly how Peter felt. We feel the same way. We answer, “*Yes, Lord, I love You!*”

But in the corner of our minds we know from experience that we will very likely again FALL SHORT OF His expectations, and Jesus knows that. Nevertheless, in spite of that likely possibility, Jesus still invites us to take a responsible role in His kingdom. “He tells us, ‘*Come! Follow Me! Feed My sheep! Join Me in the work of My kingdom!*’ How wonderful it is to experience the love, grace, and mercy of our Lord. He knows that we are but dust, yet He stretches forth His hand and invites us to come. There is work to be done. He then sends us out to share the message of salvation that our Savior is offering to others.¹⁶

Now in no way do we want to suggest that Jesus picks leaders to shepherd his flock knowing that they will probably fall into sin again and again. That is not the way it is at all. Jesus makes it clear to all that when they are saved and have the Holy Spirit residing within them, they have the capability of not sinning if they allow the Holy Spirit to lead

¹⁵ *Easy-to-Read Commentary Series – John: The Word Made Flesh*, (Holiday, FL: Green Key Books, 2004), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, 614-616.

¹⁶ Ibid.

them. That is what Jesus wants, and each of us should make every effort to attain that high standard. If we do fail, however, we need to be armed with the knowledge that we will be forgiven if we take that sin to Him and ask for that forgiveness.

We have seen in this passage what the Resurrection meant for Peter: forgiveness, a change of character, and empowerment for ministry in the power of the Holy Spirit.

So then, we call you to consider this morning: What does the Resurrection mean for you personally today? Has it purchased your salvation and secured a place in Heaven for you? Has it changed your character, transforming you from the old person to a brand new person with a different set of values and a different lifestyle? Instead of being weak and sinful, has resurrection power given you strength to do the right thing? Have you found your identity in Christ as a result of the Resurrection? Does the Holy Spirit fill you, guide you, teach you, and give you the peace of Christ each day?

If not, we invite you to make today the best Resurrection Day of your life by receiving Christ as your personal Savior. Or, if you have received Christ but feel you are faltering and falling short, then renew your commitment to Him and let yourself be filled totally with the Holy Spirit. In Peter's words:

2 Peter 1:10-11 NLT:

¹⁰ *So, dear brothers and sisters, work hard to prove that you really are among those God has called and chosen. Do these things, and you will never fall away.*

¹¹ *Then God will give you a grand entrance into the eternal Kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.*