

**Restored by Love**  
John 21:1-23  
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After this Jesus revealed himself again to the disciples by the Sea of Tiberias, and he revealed himself in this way. <sup>2</sup> Simon Peter, Thomas (called the Twin), Nathanael of Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two others of his disciples were together. <sup>3</sup> Simon Peter said to them, "I am going fishing." They said to him, "We will go with you." They went out and got into the boat, but that night they caught nothing.

<sup>4</sup> Just as day was breaking, Jesus stood on the shore; yet the disciples did not know that it was Jesus. <sup>5</sup> Jesus said to them, "Children, do you have any fish?" They answered him, "No." <sup>6</sup> He said to them, "Cast the net on the right side of the boat, and you will find some." So they cast it, and now they were not able to haul it in, because of the quantity of fish. <sup>7</sup> That disciple whom Jesus loved therefore said to Peter, "It is the Lord!" When Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he put on his outer garment, for he was stripped for work, and threw himself into the sea. <sup>8</sup> The other disciples came in the boat, dragging the net full of fish, for they were not far from the land, but about a hundred yards off.

<sup>9</sup> When they got out on land, they saw a charcoal fire in place, with fish laid out on it, and bread. <sup>10</sup> Jesus said to them, "Bring some of the fish that you have just caught." <sup>11</sup> So Simon Peter went aboard and hauled the net ashore, full of large fish, 153 of them. And although there were so many, the net was not torn. <sup>12</sup> Jesus said to them, "Come and have breakfast." Now none of the disciples dared ask him, "Who are you?" They knew it was the Lord. <sup>13</sup> Jesus came and took the bread and gave it to them, and so with the fish. <sup>14</sup> This was now the third time that Jesus was revealed to the disciples after he was raised from the dead.

<sup>15</sup> 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, "Feed my lambs." <sup>16</sup> He said to him 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, "Tend my sheep." <sup>17</sup> 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 everything; you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Feed my sheep. <sup>18</sup> Truly, truly, I say to you, when you were young, you used to dress yourself and walk wherever you wanted, but when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and another will dress you and carry you where you do not want to go." <sup>19</sup> (This he said to show by what kind of death he was to glorify God.) And after saying this he said to him, "Follow me."

<sup>20</sup> Peter turned and saw the disciple whom Jesus loved following them, the one who also had leaned back against him during the supper and had said, "Lord, who is it that is going to betray you?" <sup>21</sup> When Peter saw him, he said to Jesus, "Lord, what about this man?" <sup>22</sup> Jesus said to him, "If it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you? You follow me!" <sup>23</sup> So the saying spread abroad among the brothers that this disciple was not to die; yet Jesus did not say to him that he was not to die, but, "If it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you?"

- John 21:1-23, ESV

**Ever Failed?**

Have you ever failed spectacularly? Failures are most spectacular the more confident we are. I remember well the first and last time I ever rode a motorcycle by myself. A friend of mine in college invited me to his house for a long weekend, and he had a racing dirt bike. He showed me how to use it, and I acted all cocky and sure of myself, as only a 19-year-old young man. I got on the bike, over-revved the engine and then engaged the clutch. The front end started coming up, so I hit the brakes hard, and I flew over the front handlebars, scraping my chest along the way. It all happened within a second or two, and I was on the ground, humiliated. He said graciously, "Are you okay?" I lied and said, "Yeah, fine." And then I said, "Let's try something else."

When you fail spectacularly, it is humiliating and you are usually eager to try something else, not to try that failed experience again.

### **I. Fishing, vv. 1-14**

For Peter, being a disciple of Jesus had led him to the most spectacular failure of his life. Within hours, he had gone from swearing that he would never abandon Jesus and would follow Him right to the grave to denying vehemently three times that he even knew Jesus, even calling curses down on himself in his adamant denials.

Peter had seen Jesus twice since His resurrection, but Jesus had not said anything in particular to Peter to deal with the issue of Peter's denials. Peter knew that Jesus knew about his denials. Jesus had predicted them to Peter, and Jesus had made direct eye-contact with Peter in the courtyard of the High Priest after Peter's third denial. But in two post-resurrection appearances, Jesus had not addressed the elephant in the room.

Jesus had told His disciples to go to Galilee and wait for Him. We don't know how much time has passed between Jesus' last resurrection appearance and this one on the shores of Galilee, but we know it was enough time for the disciples to travel back to Galilee. I think it must have been a little longer than Peter anticipated, and Peter got tired of waiting. That seems to be the feeling behind his statement: "*I am going fishing.*"

For Peter, fishing was not a weekend hobby done for relaxation. This was his family business, and this had been his life before Jesus called him. Peter and Andrew, James and John all left their nets to follow Jesus. So, for Peter to say, "I am going fishing" was not an idle, "I'm bored. Let's just go put our lines in the water for something to do. A bad day fishing is better than sitting around doing nothing while we wait for Jesus." It had a deeper significance, a sense of resignation, a return to life before being called to follow Jesus and be a fisher of men.

In God's gracious providence, He replayed the circumstances of Peter's initial call to follow Jesus. Then, as now, Peter and his fellow fishermen had fished and caught nothing before the Lord intervened. Interestingly, John doesn't record that initial call of the disciples by the Sea of Galilee, but he does record this, which seems to be in keeping with his general approach to things in his Gospel.

In that initial call, Jesus sent the disciples back out to fish after they had fished all night and caught nothing. This time, Jesus tops them before they get to shore, probably because He doesn't want them to know yet that it's Him. Even though they don't know that this is Jesus speaking to them, they obey His word and obeying His word brings an abundant blessing.

In both miraculous catches, we have an important lesson: We can work and work and work, and as long as we're working in our own strength according to our own wisdom, our work will not bring lasting and meaningful results. But as soon as we work at the calling of Jesus and under His blessing, the fruitful results are

real and lasting, according to His word. It's not that suddenly we'll have a lot of money or a huge church ministry, but the results will be real and lasting and glorifying to God.

With their net so full of fish that they could not haul the catch into the boat, John was the first to have the light-bulb moment and realize that this was the Lord. Just as in the empty tomb, John is blessed with spiritual insight, but Peter is blessed with boldness. He puts on his outer garment and throws himself into the water.

Peter's boldness here is remarkable. At the first miraculous catch of fish, he dropped to his knees and begged Jesus to leave him, saying, "Depart from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man." This time, he swims to Jesus and then runs to be with Him.

The disciples caught 153 fish. Whether this number has symbolic significance or not, and if so, what the significance may be, I just don't know. It seems to be most significant for the fact that this large a number of fish would normally have broken the net. The fishermen were not able to haul the catch into the boat and had to drag it onto the shore, and John comments that, despite the very large number of fish, the net didn't break.

We also have a bit of a replay here of the miracle of the Feeding of the 5,000, in that Jesus has bread and fish that He gives to His disciples, reminding them of His miraculous provision for the multitude. I think the fish here made such a deep impression that fish became an important early symbol of Christianity.

## 2. Forgiveness, vv. 15-17

Once Jesus gets the disciples seated around the fire and eating their fish and bread, He begins to address the elephant in the room (or on the seashore, as it were). He does so in a personal, powerful, and graciously effective way.

*"Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?"*

Notice that Jesus is calling Peter by his old name, "Simon, son of John." This might seem mean at first, but Simon Peter has gone back to his old life, and so Jesus is meeting him where he is by calling by his own name. Peter has hardly been acting like a rock lately, has he? Perhaps calling him Peter would have been even more painful, a reminder of how un-rock-like his behavior had been.

What does Jesus mean by "these"? It could be one of three things –

Do you love me more than you love these other disciples? – That seems most unlikely.

Do you love me more than these boats and nets, these things of your old life? – That's very possible. Peter had to choose between his old way of life fishing or his new way of life following and serving Jesus.

Do you love me more than these other disciples do? - This one is also a likely candidate, perhaps the most likely, since Peter before his denials had boldly proclaimed to the Lord that, even though everyone else would fall away, he would stand and would never deny or forsake the Lord, even though Jesus had just told him he would do exactly that.

In many sermons on this passage, much emphasis is placed on the two different Greek words for love used here. One is agape or agapao and the other is phileo. Jesus asks Peter the first two time whether he has agape for

Jesus and Peter responds with *phileo*. Then, the third time, Jesus Himself switches to *phileo* and Peter replies with *phileo*. Now, I'm not really eager to dismantle other preachers' sermons; certainly many have emphasized the difference between these words with all sincerity and integrity and passion. However, I have to be faithful to the Word of God, and I'm just not convinced there's any meaningful difference between these two words, especially in John's Gospel.

Consider these two examples from John's Gospel:

When describing the Father's love for the Son, John uses both *agape* and *phileo* -

John 3:35 – “The Father loves the Son and has given all things into his hand.” - *agape*

John 5:20 – “For the Father loves the Son and shows him all that he himself is doing.” – *phileo*

When describing Jesus' love for Lazarus, John uses both *agape* and *phileo* -

John 11:5 – “Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus.” - *agape*

John 11:36 – “So the Jews said, “See how he loved him!” – *phileo*

If we look outside the Gospel of John for a distinction in the meaning of these words in Scripture, we run in Proverbs 8:17 – “I love those who love me, and those who seek me diligently find me.”

In the original Hebrews, the same word is used for love, but in the Greek Septuigint, the words are *agape* and *phileo*, so God *agapes* those who *phileo* Him. But if you want to think that this mean that *agape* is clearly a word for divine love, you run into other problems –

1. Jacob's preference for Joseph over his brothers in Gen. 37 is described using both words.
2. Amnon's lustful desire for his half-sister, Tamar, in 2 Samuel 13, is described using both verbs.

So, the evidence is pretty clear and overwhelming that these words are simply synonyms without any meaningful distinction in the Bible. They are simply two different words for love, that's all.

Seeing that more clearly, we can then just read this passage as we have it in our English Bibles and not get hung up on which word for love is being used. The important thing here is the fact that Jesus asks Peter this same question three times, once for every time Peter denied Him, and that, in response to each of Peter's affirmative responses, Jesus re-commissions Peter to his pastoral calling.

*“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, “Feed my lambs.”*

*16 He said to him 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, “Tend 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 everything; you know that I love you.” Jesus said to him, “Feed my sheep.”*

Peter was grieved, and it was good for him to be grieved. This was a godly grief, as Jesus was leading him graciously through the process of repentance. Peter needed to be grieved because he had sinned seriously, and his serious sin needed to be dealt with.

The Apostle Paul had to deal with some serious sin issues in the church at Corinth. In 2 Corinthians 7:8-10, Paul wrote –

*For even if I made you grieve with my letter, I do not regret it—though I did regret it, for I see that that letter grieved you, though only for a while. <sup>9</sup> As it is, I rejoice, not because you were grieved, but because you were grieved into repenting. For you felt a godly grief, so that you suffered no loss through us.*

*<sup>10</sup> For godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation without regret, whereas worldly grief produces death. (ESV)*

In our culture, we have a dangerous tendency to be overly nice to a fault. We tend not to want to call anything sin and not deal seriously with real sin issues. Unless, of course, something falls into the “unforgiveable sin” category in our culture, and then we’re eager to vilify and dismiss the offending party. This is not only wrong for us to do this, but it is also profoundly unhelpful, for we have all sinned, and what we need is real forgiveness, not a mere dismissal or a categorical condemnation. We don’t need to hear, “Oh, that’s okay, no big deal, don’t worry about it” and we also don’t need to be treated as an unacceptable monster who did what must not ever be done and thus can never be accepted again.

Jesus deals with Peter’s denials directly and yet lovingly, restoring him in a step-by-step, deliberate manner. He is the Good Shepherd who knows how to deal with His sheep and He’s setting a pattern for us to follow in dealing with wayward sheep – direct, loving, intentional, restoring love.

### **3. Future, vv. 18-23**

As soon as Peter is restored, Jesus immediately begins to speak to him of his future:

*Truly, truly, I say to you, when you were young, you used to dress yourself and walk wherever you wanted, but when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and another will dress you and carry you where you do not want to go.” <sup>19</sup> (This he said to show by what kind of death he was to glorify God.) And after saying this he said to him, “Follow me.”*

At first glance, this might seem a bit cruel, too: Why would Jesus tell Peter about how he’s going to die at this fragile point in Peter’s life? Actually, this, too, is part of Peter’s gracious restoration.

Remember what Peter had said to Jesus when Jesus predicted his denials? Peter had proclaimed that he was ready to follow Jesus to the grave. He had failed, badly. Jesus had been taken to the cross, and Peter denied knowing Him and ran off in shame. Jesus is here letting Peter know that he will not fail in this way again.

Peter would get his opportunity to follow Jesus unto death, being crucified for his love of his Master. When the moment comes, Peter will declare his unworthiness to die like his Master, and so he will be crucified upside-

down. But these words by Jesus are a loving restoration: Peter will not fail this way again. He will follow Jesus to the end.

Then, John adds a clarification about his own future, which we'll talk about next week, as we wrap up John's Gospel.

### **Do You Know How Much You're Loved?**

I opened today's message by asking if you've ever failed spectacularly, and then I told a silly story about a dirt bike. I think we all know that's not the kind of failure that truly knocks us down and takes the wind out of our sails. God is the gracious restorer of His people in all of our failures. When we have failed, and failed miserably, we need to trust not in ourselves and our ability to do better next time, but in the Lord and in His unfailing love for us.

If you belong to God, you are His and He loves you more that you could ever begin to grasp. His love is our strength and our hope and our restoration. It's His word, His calling, His power, and His love that saves us, uses us, restores us, and keeps us, from beginning to end.