

The Fourth Sunday of Easter

If You Love Me, Follow Me

The Third Revelation of the Resurrected Jesus: Part 2



John 21:15-25 (ESV)

¹⁵ 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." 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. ¹⁸ 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." ¹⁹ (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."

²⁰ 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?" ²¹ When Peter saw him, he said to Jesus, "Lord, what about this man?" ²² Jesus said to him, "If it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you? You follow me!" ²³ 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?"

²⁴ This is the disciple who is bearing witness about these things, and who has written these things, and we know that his testimony is true.

²⁵ Now there are also many other things that Jesus did. Were every one of them to be written, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written.

Introduction

Today is the fourth Sunday of Easter. Or we might say, today is the fourth Sunday since the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. The resurrection is too important, too wonderful, too powerful, and too glorious for us to forget it or to allow it too quickly to fade from our thinking. So we allow this truth to linger in our minds. We stay with it and savor the fact that this is an historical event.

Jesus truly was crucified in Jerusalem during the Passover in April of A.D. 33 and he truly was resurrected from the dead three days later. He then began to reveal himself to his disciples. He did not reveal himself to the Jewish authorities and religious leaders. Instead, he, over a 40 day period, appeared to and spent time with his disciples and followers.

As we learned last week, about two weeks after his resurrection, Jesus met his disciples in Galilee, just as he had promised to do before his crucifixion.¹ He met them on the shore of the Sea of Tiberias (also called the Sea of Galilee). In John's gospel, this is the third time that the resurrected Jesus revealed himself to his disciples. Last week we made it through half of this third encounter.

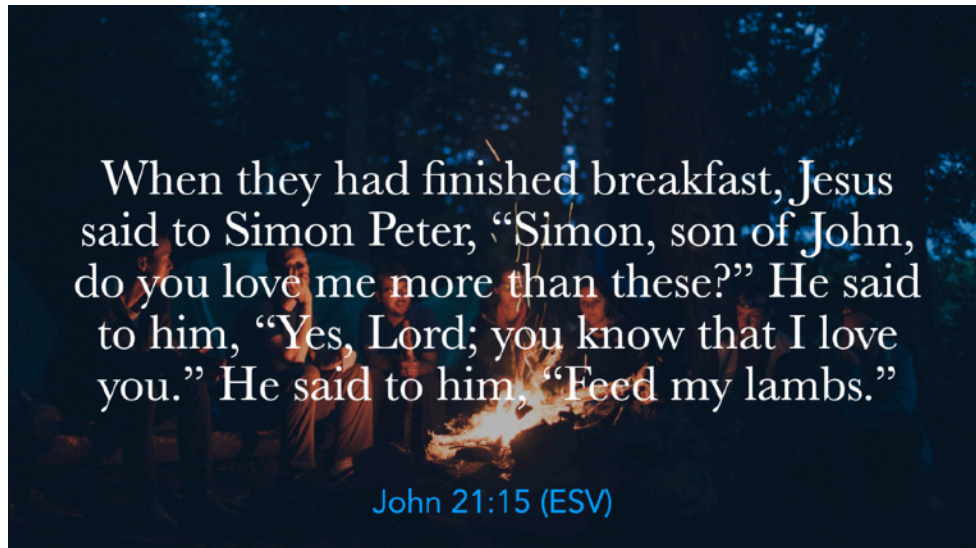
The disciples had been futilely fishing all night, catching nothing. From the shore Jesus called to them being about 100 yards away in their boat and told them to cast their nets on the other side of the boat, which they did, and then caught almost more fish than they could haul in. Apparently only John immediately realized this was Jesus. They hauled up the fish and went to him on shore. Jesus knew they would be hungry after a long night of fishless fishing and so he had prepared breakfast for them. As they walked ashore, they could smell the fish cooking over a fire and the baked bread lying there ready for them as they arrived.

And that's where we left them. Sitting around a fire eating fish and bread for breakfast.

¹ Mark 14:28; 16:7.

The Conversation Around the Fire

And now, John turns his attention to the conversation that took place after breakfast between Jesus and Peter in front of the other six disciples as they all sat around the fire.



Jesus waited until breakfast was finished to have this conversation. Perhaps the conversation was minimal while eating or maybe they were just catching up a bit or maybe they didn't speak much at all as they eat. But no matter what happened during breakfast, Jesus waited to have this conversation until everyone had finished breakfast.

Much theological ink has been spilled speculating to whom or what the "these" in this verse refers. Does the words 'these' refer to the fish, the boat and nets, or to the other disciples? Grammatically it is not clear. Is Jesus asking Peter, "Do you love me more than you love fish and fishing?" In other words, is Jesus asking Peter if he loves him more than he loves his profession and these tools of his trade? "Do you love me more than you love your job?"

Or is Jesus asking Peter if he loves these disciples, who over the past few years have become to him like family, more than he loves Jesus? In other words, "Peter, do you love these your brothers more than you love me?"

Or is Jesus asking Peter a comparative question about his love for Jesus versus the other disciples' love for Jesus? To clarify, is Jesus saying, "Peter, do you love me more than these other disciples love me?"

I'm convinced the latter is the best option since Peter had all but said these same words during the Last Supper. I believe that Jesus is intentionally taking them all back to the events of that night. Jesus wants them to remember what happened. Recall that Jesus not only predicted Judas' betrayal and Peter's denial, but he had also said,

"This night you will all fall away because of me" (Mt. 26:31).

To this Peter replied,

"Though they all fall away, I will never fall away. Even if I must die with you I will never deny you." (Mt. 26:32-33).

On that night, Peter was effectively claiming that he *did* love Jesus more than the other disciples. He was claiming to have a deeper affection and allegiance to Jesus than the other disciples had. In Peter's mind, the other disciples may indeed fall away (and most likely they would since Jesus tended to be correct about his predictions), but it was impossible for Peter to imagine that *he* would fall away.

Sitting around this fire on the shore of the Sea of Galilee, Jesus reminds Peter of his words that night. "Peter, do you still think you love me more than these other disciples love me?" Peter answers with humility. He answers the first part of Jesus' question, but he wisely and humbly does not answer the latter. "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you," he says, but he refuses to compare his love with the love of the other disciples.

Jesus goes on to repeat the same question two more times. For a total of three times Jesus, very formally, asks Peter, "Do you love me." Each time Peter answers the same, but the third time Jesus asked the question, we are told that "**Peter was grieved**" (v.17) because Jesus asked him this same question for the third time. It's not difficult to understand why Peter was grieved. The first time Jesus asked the question he did so in such a way that recalled the night Peter denied Jesus. Now he asked him the same question three times.

Peter is grieved because he recalls his denial of Christ. He is sad because he remembers his failure. The memory of it brings pain, thus Peter is grieved. However, Jesus never causes pain because he delights in causing pain, but rather that its exposure will result in healing. Jesus is not rubbing Peter's nose in his own mess for sake of taking vengeance or because he gets his kicks by watching sinners squirm. Jesus is exposing Peter's pain in order to bring healing in Peter's heart so that he will be equipped to fulfill God's purpose for his life.

We all know that Jesus is not asking this question three times because he doesn't know the answer. Jesus is not asking because he is seeking information. Certainly he already knows the answer and Peter affirms this every time he answers Jesus' question. Therefore something else is happening here. Remember, this scene is unfolding around a campfire with six other disciples watching everything is happening. This is not a private conversation. It is a very public conversation. Just as Peter denied Jesus three times in a public setting, so now he has reaffirmed his love for Jesus three times in a public setting. Just as Peter first denied Jesus three times while warming himself beside a fire, so here he has reaffirmed his love for Jesus three times while sitting beside a fire.

Only this time Jesus does not contradict Peter's affirmation of his love for Jesus. During the Last Supper when Peter publicly affirmed his love for Jesus (by claiming that he would never deny Jesus), Jesus then contradicted Peter's claim by correcting him and telling him that before morning had fully dawned that he would deny him three times. This time Jesus does not do that. Here on the shore of the Sea of Tiberias, Jesus lets stand Peter's affirmation of his love. Evidently, Peter will never deny Jesus again.

Why Did God Permit Peter's Denial?

The question now arises, Why would God permit Peter to stumble in such a way? He obviously knew in advance that this denial would take place. Why would God allow Peter to deny him? Why wouldn't he have prevented this sin? He certainly had the power to prevent it.

I suspect we can each identify with Peter can't we? Hasn't each of us experienced a similar denial of Jesus? Have you ever been asked a direct question about your relationship with Jesus and you denied him? Or least, you just remain silent and did not affirm your love for Jesus? Why does God permit us to fail him in such ways? Why doesn't he keep us from such failings? I believe it is because those who truly are the children of God will learn and grow stronger through such experiences. I believe God allows his children to fail so that we will more acutely know our weakness and his sweetness. Every time a Christian fails, we discover that we are not as strong as we thought and sin is not as good as we thought.

Sometimes our lives are very much like Peter's. We think we are mature and solid in our faith. We think we are strong and can endure any storm. Pride is so seductive and subtle and secretly sneaks into our spiritual lives under the guise of spiritual maturity. The Bible warns us,

"Let anyone who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall" (1 Cor. 10:12).

We can so easily think we are all good and have our lives together, then suddenly, we find ourselves sitting around a campfire, in the presence of people whose company we ought not to keep, and before we know it, the rooster is crowing and we are denying Jesus, or committing that secret sin, or lying again, or being deceptive and covering our tracks, and hiding in the dark.

Why did God permit Peter's sin? Why does God permit his children to sin in such ways? I believe that reason is the same,

- so that Peter and we would be more humble and less self-reliant;
- so that Peter and we would learn to lean upon the strength that God provides rather than upon our own strength;
- so that Peter and we would learn to spend more time in prayer than in proud boasting;
- so that Peter and we would learn that sin is never as satisfying as it seems;
- so that Peter and we would learn that only obedience brings the sweetness of peace and satisfaction to our souls;

- so that Peter and we would learn that God is more gracious than he is judicial, more kind than he is condemning, and more gentle than is judgmental.
- How sweet is our God who forgives such unworthy creatures as ourselves? How kind he is to us.

Jesus' Purpose for Peter's Life

Ultimately, I believe that God permits our failings so that we will be rightly prepared and properly fitted for his purposes for our lives. Notice what Jesus said to Peter after each time that Peter affirmed his love for Jesus. Each time after Peter said, "Yes, I love you," Jesus then gave him a purpose. Three times Peter replied, "Yes, I love you," and three times Jesus gave him a specific command that expressed his purpose for Peter's life.

The first command is, "**Feed my lambs**" (v.15). The second is, "**Tend my sheep**" (v.16). And the third is, "**Feed my sheep**" (v.17). Jesus is revealing his purpose for Peter's life. He is commissioning him to care for that which belongs to Jesus. Jesus is entrusting into Peter's care, *his* lambs and *his* sheep. Peter is to physically be present to do, for Jesus' lambs and sheep, what Jesus would not be physically present to do.

Peter is to both **feed** and **tend** God's flock. The word 'feed' (βόσκω, *boskō*) literally means, "to pasture; to feed; to cause animals to eat."² The word 'tend' (ποιμαίνω, *poimainō*) means, "to herd and tend flocks of sheep or goats—to shepherd, to take care of, to tend."³ This is the root word from which we have our word pastor. Peter is to *nurture* and *care* for both little lambs and adult sheep. Jesus' purpose for Peter's life is to focus on the care, nourishment, growth, and protection of all of God's people, including both young and old.

Perhaps wayward lambs can most compassionately be cared for by formerly wayward shepherds. Perhaps wandering sheep can most gently be brought home by formerly wandering shepherds. Perhaps broken people can most effectively be ministered to and healed by formerly broken healers who haven't forgotten their former brokenness. Perhaps grace can most compellingly be given by those who have tasted the sweetness of having received it.

Included in God's sovereign plan of redemption of this cracked and broken world, is his use of fallen man. God takes the broken people who will go to him in faith through Jesus, heals them, restores them, and recommissions them for his great and good purposes in this world. If God is to use in his plan any people at all it will have to be fallen ones, since quite frankly, that's all he has to work with.

² Johannes P. Louw and Eugene Albert Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1996), 249.

³ *Ibid.*, 517.

If you have fallen, then do not despair thinking that you are no longer of any use to God. Do you love him? Then obey him. Do not be ashamed of the gospel that says,

"Whoever comes to me, I will never cast you out" (Jn. 6:37).

Jesus had a purpose for Peter's life. His purpose was not thwarted by Peter's moral failure. Peter was humbled through his failure. Peter learned by his failing. He learned that Jesus better knew what Peter would do than did Peter himself. He learned that Jesus loved him in spite of the fact that *Jesus knew in advance that Peter would cause him pain through his denial, and yet, Jesus loved him anyway.*

This knowledge deepened Peter's love for Jesus. Who wouldn't love someone who loved you even though they knew you would cause them pain and publicly deny him? Jesus' purpose for Peter's life remained intact despite his moral failure. Jesus granted his full forgiveness to Peter and restored him. He also did this in front of the other disciples so that would be no doubt among them as to whether or not Peter would still fulfill God's purposes for his life. (He may have also done this in front of the other disciples in order for them to have a very graphic example to remind them the egregious sin can be forgiven.)

Jesus' Purpose For the End of Peter's Life

After telling Peter that he still had purposes for Peter's life, Jesus then told him of his purposes for Peter's death. Peter would not only glorify God in his life, but he would also glorify God in his death.

¹⁸ 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." ¹⁹ (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."

John 21:18-19 (ESV)

The resurrected Jesus is here claiming to know how Peter's life would end. The knowledge that the resurrected Jesus possesses is beyond the scope of mere human knowledge. Jesus has purposes for Peter's life, which he had just explained, but Jesus also has purposes for Peter's death. Peter will glorify God in both his life and in his death. Jesus chose to reveal this to Peter, but he did not tell us why he chose to reveal it.

The good news that Peter will live to be “old.” The average lifespan of a first century male was between 60 to 65. The bad news was that Peter would not die of natural causes. Jesus tells Peter that in his old age his personal freedom will be taken away. Others would dress him and lead him to a place where he would not want to go. John informs us that this was Jesus’ way of describing the kind of death that Peter would die. Yet even his death would bring glory to God. If church tradition is correct, Peter lived to be about 65 and he was condemned to be crucified. He requested that he be crucified upside down because he considered himself unworthy to die in the same position in which Jesus died.

We ought not to think that Jesus’ purposes for us do not include how we die. The purpose and sovereignty of God over us includes both the day of our birth and the day of our death. As the psalmist writes,

“In your book were written, the days ordained for me, when as yet there was not one of them” (Psalm. 139:16).

God’s plans and purpose for our lives are not limited to the good and productive years. He has plans and purposes for us even in our death.

There have been many faithful Christians who have died during this coronavirus crisis. Not one of them have died apart from the good plan of our sovereign God. Jesus taught us, that not even a bird can die apart from the will of God, so how much more true is it that no human dies apart from the will of God? Since it is true that God values a tiny little sparrow, then how much more does he value the his own children in covenant relationship with him? He knows the number of the hair on our heads and so we need not fear that God is not sovereign over the day of our death.⁴

Different Purposes for Different Disciples

The final few verses teach us that God’s plans and purposes are not the same for each of his children. After talking to Peter about how he would die, Jesus then invites Peter to go for a walk with him. In v.19 he says to Peter, “Follow me.” So Jesus began walking away from the fire and Peter followed him and John began walking behind Peter.

John 21:20-23 (ESV)

²⁰ 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?” ²¹ When Peter saw him, he said to Jesus, “Lord, what about this man?” ²² Jesus said to him, “If it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you? You follow me!” ²³ So the saying spread abroad among the brothers that this

⁴ Mt. 10:29-31.

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?"

After hearing about his own death, Peter looked back and saw John (the author of this gospel) walking behind them. He then asked Jesus, "What's going to happen to him?" Isn't it interesting how quickly Peter begins to compare himself with John. Peter has just heard some very poignant details about how he would die and he immediately looks behind him to see where John is and then asks Jesus about him. Why doesn't Peter ask Jesus a few clarifying questions about his own death? Why doesn't he ask about what's going to happen to his wife and children? Or where will he die? Will it be painful? Should I establish a trust fund for the kids? Should I buy more life insurance? Are the boys going to fight over the boats? Or any number of other questions, but he doesn't ask any questions about his own death. He immediately begins to think about John. Peter first curiosity is directed toward John. How quick we are to compare ourselves with others. Jesus responded by saying,

"If I want him stay alive until I come [again], then what is that to you? You follow me."

Jesus is effectively saying, "The end of his life is none of your business. You follow the path I've laid out for you. I have a different plan and purpose for John. Your obedience to my plan for your life does not depend upon you knowing my plan for his life. You follow me and don't worry about John."

Jesus has different plans for each different disciple. He does not call each of us to do the same thing or walk the same road. Therefore, we need to be cautious about comparing our lives to the lives of others believers. Comparison can be very dangerous. God gives to each of his children differing gifts. Comparing yourself with your fellow believers around you can lead to jealousy and envy.

Jesus' words to Peter remind us that we are each individually called to be faithful to do what God has called us each to do. We are not to spend a lot of time asking why God didn't open up this door or that door for us like he did for brother or sister so-in-so. Jesus said to Peter, "**You follow me.**" I must be obedient to and faithful in God's plan for my life, not God's plan for John's life or Timothy's life or Lydia's life.

Misinterpreting Jesus' Words

And notice how when they missed Jesus' point, they misinterpreted his words. When Peter told the other disciples what Jesus said to him, "*If I want him to remain until I come [again], then what is that to you?*" either he or they misunderstood Jesus to mean that it was in fact his will that John would not die. However, John did not miss Jesus' point. So John clarified the misunderstanding. He states clearly, "**Jesus did not say that John would never die.**" What he did say was, "*If it is my will that he remain until I come [again], what is that to you?*"

In other words, Jesus was saying to Peter, *"My will for John's life is not your concern. Your concern is my will for your own life."* If you misunderstand the purpose of the words, you will misunderstand the meaning and application of the words. John did die, thus it was not the will of Jesus that he never die.

Jesus Will Come Again

There is one final point to ponder. Jesus reports that will come again. This may be one of the clearest declarations in all of the New Testament, from the lips of Jesus himself, that he will return a second time. Jesus will come again.

One day Jesus will bodily return to this earth. One day the pierced feet of the resurrected Jesus will stand again on this dusty earth. And when he does return, he will return as the conquering king that he truly is. He will not come as a "Jesus child, meek and mild." He come as the reigning king of the universe, ruling with a rod of iron.

He will come with eyes like fire and hair as white as wool.⁵ His feet will shine like polished bronze, his voice will thunder louder than the roar of Niagara Falls, and his face will shine like the fullest brightness of the noon-day sun on a cloudless sky. His presence will strike terror into the heart of even the holiest of people, and every human being will fall at his feet as though dead. Jesus will come again.

Are you ready to meet him?

Conclusion

Let me offer some concluding thoughts.

1. ***God's purpose for your life does not preclude, but rather includes your failures.*** When Jesus chose Peter he knew exactly what kind of disciple he would be. He knew what would be his successes as well as his failures and yet he still chose him. Don't allow your failings to keep you from pursuing God's purpose for you life. This does not give you a license to sin, but it does mean that your sins do not render you useless to God's unfolding purpose for your life.
2. ***Rid yourself of all pride and wrap yourself in all humility.*** Pride will lead you into sin, while humility will lead you away from sin. Peter's pride led him to believe that he'd never deny

⁵ See Revelation 1:14-16.

Jesus, but in humility he stopped thinking more highly of himself that he should. Remember, "*God opposes to the proud, but he gives grace to the humble.*"⁶

3. ***Feed the people around you with the goodness of God's word.*** During this coronavirus crisis, when you come across a verse or a passage of Scripture that blesses you, share it with your family and friends. Don't keep it to yourself. Share it. Help others find nourishment from God's word.
4. ***Love Jesus above all else in your life.*** Do you love Jesus more than your job? Do you love him more than your family? More than your friends? More than your health? Do you love him more than your own life?
5. ***God is as sovereign over your day of your death as he is over the day of your birth.*** God is sovereign over all the days of our lives. Including over every day of coronavirus lockdown. If you are in Christ, then you need not fear death or dying. Jesus has conquered death. He entered death but death could not hold him. Because Jesus has been resurrected from the dead, all those who put faith in him need not live in fear of death. Jesus will walk with you through death and he will lead each of his children safely into his eternal kingdom. Make it your aim to glorify Jesus both in your life and in your death.
6. ***Faithfully follow God's plan for your life, not someone else's.*** God has a different pathway for each of children. He does not call us each to walk down the same road. Don't compare your life with someone else and think that God's not directing your life because it's different. Jesus had one plan for Peter's life while he had another for John's. Faithfully walk the pathway Jesus has laid before you. Keep your eyes on him and he will direct your steps.
7. ***Jesus is coming again.*** One day Jesus will return to this earth. One day every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is King of kings and Lord of lords. Are you ready for that day?

Discussion Questions

Here's a few optional discussion questions. Choose as many or as few as you please.

1. Have you ever felt that your failures render you useless to God's plan for your life? If so, how does the fact that Jesus restored Peter after his failure change the way you think about your own failings?
2. Contemplate the fact that Jesus knew that Peter would deny him in his moment of greatest need and yet he chose and loved Peter anyway. Apply this truth to your own life. How does this make you feel?

⁶ James 4:6; 1 Peter 5:5.

3. Do you think of yourself as a more proud or a more humble person? How would your coworkers describe you?
4. Describe a recent time when you have felt spiritually fed and nourished by God's word. What was the passage? How did it bless you?
5. Do you fear death? Why or why not?
6. How might it be possible to glorify Jesus in your death?
7. Do you struggle with comparing your life with that of others? How does Jesus words to Peter in vs.22 help you guard against unhelpful comparison? Does knowing that Jesus has a different life pathway for each of his followers help your faith in any way? If so, how?
8. When you contemplate the second coming of Jesus, what emotions are stirred within you? Explain why these emotions are stirred?