

## Jesus Restores Simon Peter

TEXT: Jn 21:1-19

Words for kids: Peter, Jesus, fishing, love

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Scr. Reading: John 21:1-14

The Life of Simon Peter

The sun broke the horizon like a thumbnail of fire before Peter even noticed the night had ended. He and his friends had been out on the lake all night long, with nothing to show for it. Fishing was hard work, and he was tired. And so, as daybreak approached, he flopped down on the deck, leaned his head back on the side of the ship, and closed his eyes.

Peter had grown up fishing, so he had barely noticed the rhythms and sounds of the work that night. The whistle of the nets as they flew through the air, the slap as they hit the water and then slowly sank, the grunts of men as they pulled them back to the boat. Usually he found comfort in the familiarity of his trade, but not tonight. His mind and heart were miles away in Jerusalem, reliving those awful moments from a few weeks ago.

It had all started right here on this lake about 3 years ago, in a setting just like this one. They had fished all night with nothing, until Jesus came along. Somehow, this carpenter-turned-teacher had filled two of the company boats with fish. It was a remarkable miracle, but it provoked an even more remarkable response in Peter. He suddenly realized he was in the presence of someone utterly unlike himself. He would never forget how he felt in that moment. Completely sinful and exposed, but also completely loved and blessed.

From that point on, everything had changed. He left the business and followed Jesus. Day and night, he tagged along with his new Master, listening to His words, watching Him perform miracles, trying to figure out who He was. They were exhilarating days – though sometimes confusing! – and Peter loved every second of it. He had never met anyone like this Jesus of Nazareth, and he found his heart growing more and more bound to this man. Sure, it had cost a lot to abandon his old life and follow Jesus, but it had been worth it. So worth it.

It was almost like a dream then, for Peter to find himself back in this boat, bobbing on the waves of Galilee. Or maybe the dream had been

all the other stuff—the signs, the parables, the miracles, the promises. Finding himself back here on the Sea of Galilee, he almost had the sense that everything he had experienced and learned from Jesus was like a dream. It was almost as if none of that had happened at all. Had it? His heart was as empty as the nets.

Everything was fine for over three years, but just a few weeks ago it started to go wrong. Jesus started talking about betrayal and suffering and death. At first Peter was irritated by it, but Jesus rebuked him. So lately, he had just found it all confusing.

There was one thing he knew for sure, or so he had thought at the time: this Jesus he was following was the promised Messiah of God. And that's what made it all so confusing. Messiahs don't die; they kill! They don't submit; they conquer. It was bad enough that Jesus had talked about it. But then he had gone ahead and done it! At first, Peter grabbed a sword and fought back—one reckless fisherman against dozens of professional soldiers—but Jesus stopped him. And then He allowed himself to be taken, convicted, and crucified on a cross like a slave, like a criminal. What Peter experienced that night went against everything he thought he knew about the Bible, about God's plan for Israel, and about this man Jesus. At that moment, nothing seemed more certain to him than that it had all been a lie.

Peter's expectations of the Messiah were clear and seemed perfectly reasonable: He would never serve, never submit, never surrender. Yet that night Jesus did all three in the course of a couple hours. Everything Peter believed about Jesus had vanished like a mist in the course of the evening.

Years later, as an old man, Peter wrote a letter which echoed the lessons he learned that night. As we've seen earlier this year, Peter's first letter is his pastoral dissertation on suffering, and it shows that he had come to understand that the call of the cross is not to fight back or destroy the source of our suffering. Instead, like Jesus did that night, Christians embrace their suffering with all the hope and courage God gives through faith, because we know it's not the end. We know He will carry us through. And we know He has wise and good purposes in it all.

The deepest ache in Peter's heart, though, wasn't about Jesus. It was about himself. Why had he run? How could he, after he had sworn his loyalty? Sure, it was disorienting to wake up suddenly to clanking armor, swaying lanterns, and a crowd of soldiers. But looking back, Peter knew he hadn't just been disoriented. He was scared.

For a moment, his love for Jesus overcame his fear for his own life, and he followed the crowd from a distance. He gained access to the courtyard outside the house where Jesus was being held, and he warmed himself there by the fire. The fire sparks with irony, because Peter's warm hands belie his increasingly cold heart. Fear was taking hold. Three times the people asked him if he had been with Jesus. Three times he denied it. Oh, how he hated those memories. How he wished he could relive that hour by the fire. And as if his lie wasn't painful enough to remember, what came next was immeasurably worse. We don't know exactly how it took place—perhaps Peter looked up and saw Jesus through a window or perhaps the guards were moving the Savior through the courtyard from one part of the house to another. We read in Luke's gospel that Jesus turned and looked directly at Peter.

At that moment, it was like everyone else faded away from the scene. No guards, no crowd, no little servant girl. Just Peter and Jesus, frozen in time. The Savior's face was battered, but His eyes were crystal clear. And they cut Peter to the depth of his heart. Jesus knew. He had heard. Peter had failed.

His heart broke, and he fled. Maybe to a dark corner in Jerusalem somewhere, maybe to a cave outside the city – we don't know where he went. All we know is his torrent of tears couldn't wash away his guilt.

It seems that even the resurrection didn't erase Peter's pain and guilt. One thing we know for sure is that not a single one of Jesus' followers expected Him to rise from the dead. They all thought it was over. And so when He did actually return to life, it understandably took them some time to process what had happened.

Peter, it appears, returned to his old life for a while. Or he tried anyway. Here he is spending the night the Sea of Galilee, trying to make a living. As usual, his actions influence the other disciples (v 3). Peter: "I am

going fishing." They said, "We will go with you." And that's where we found them when our story began.

At daybreak, Jesus draws near. He prepares a small fire on the shore and begins to make breakfast—fish and bread (v 9). After a moment, He stands to His feet, walks to the edge of the water, and calls to them through the morning mist. "Children, do you have any fish?" The whole story is riddled with tenderness. "Children" He calls them.

But even more tender is what He does next. It's certainly kind of Him to help these fishermen find success after a night of failure, but it's the way He does it that really shows His heart. It's a déjà vu moment, and He's put it together just for His friend, Simon Peter. "'Cast you 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." (v 6)

Somehow, Peter misses the point altogether and has to have John help him out: "It's the Lord. Peter, it's the Lord!" Per his usual "act first, think later" style, Peter throws himself overboard and plunges into the water. He has to be near Jesus, so he takes the quickest route to shore! No hesitation. No resistance. He lumbers up out of the water, soaked and dripping, pauses for a second to look into Jesus' eyes, and then wraps the Savior in a soggy embrace. You wonder if they both have to blink to clear away tears. John tells us (v 8) the boat was about 100 yards from shore, but you get the impression Peter would have crossed that distance if it had been a hundred miles.

The others arrive a few minutes later, their bulging net still hanging over the side of the boat. Jesus invites them to add a few fish from their catch to the breakfast He's prepared; so Peter, still vibrating with adrenaline from his swim, grabs the net and pulls it up himself. We don't need to wonder what they're thinking – John tells us they're all wanting to ask "Who are you?" But deep down, they know it's Him. You wonder how they knew. My guess would be His ruined hands. Whenever He wanted to prove to them it was really Him, He never pointed to His face. It was always those hands.

Apparently, it was an uneventful meal after that. We know they

certainly didn't argue about who was the greatest. The Greatest, they now all understood, had just served them breakfast.

Probably sleepy after fishing all night long, Peter stretched out next to the fire and closed his eyes. His belly is full. The sun and fire are warm. His clothes are beginning to dry. Only the sound of his name kept him from dozing off altogether: "Simon, son of John." It was Jesus. "Do you love me?"

**[Read vv 15-17.]**

Three times Jesus asks the question. Three times Peter responds, "Yes, Lord. You know I love you." Three times Jesus charges him: "Feed my sheep." Don't overlook the three-fold dialogue. Remember the last time Peter had to answer the same question three times?

How kind of Jesus to lead Peter through this dialogue. The question. The answer. The command. Again. And again. "Do you love me?" "Yes, Lord, you know I love you." "Feed my sheep."

What is Jesus doing? He's restoring His friend, the disciples' fallen leader. He's commanded his followers to forgive. Now He is showing them the way. Jesus doesn't brush Peter's sin aside as if it had never happened. He tenderly and symbolically displays it for everyone to view; and then with surprising grace in His words, He buries it forever. Jesus opens the painful wound in Peter's soul with His three questions, and then He heals it again with His three commands. Peter suddenly understands, Jesus still wants him to be the leader. "You, Simon, my fallen, forgiven friend: Feed my sheep. Lead the way"

All the gospels record Peter's three-fold failure, but only John tells us this story of Peter's three-fold restoration. John and Peter had been friends since childhood. What a kind way for John to treat his friend.

Isn't it a wonderful story? So compelling, so memorable. It seems to resonate with something deep and needed down in our hearts. You know why? Because it's really not just *a* story. It's a reenactment of The Story. A broken individual, drifting on the sea, confused, guilty, disappointed, disillusioned. A Savior comes and offers hope—

forgiveness for the past and a mission for the future. How? His wounded hands and feet tells the story of how. Sins absorbed in His body. Love reflected now in His eyes. The individual is you. The Savior is Jesus. The story is yours.

What should we learn? Three lessons.

**1. Our love, not our faith, matters most.**

Notice again Jesus' question. What is He most concerned to draw out of his friend? What quality in Peter's life is Jesus focused on? "Do you *love* me?" Jesus asks about his love, not his commitment or his repentance or his faith. Peter's faith has faltered badly various times along the way. But his love has been constant and strong.

Friend, do you love him? I'm not asking if you are living perfectly for Him. I'm not asking if you always trust Him. Do you love Him?

**Luke 7:47** *Therefore I tell you, her sins, which are many, are forgiven- for she loved much. But he who is forgiven little, loves little."*

**2. Our actions, not our words, show our heart.**

Jesus said to Peter: "If you love, feed my sheep." And he did. Peter became the primary shepherd for Jesus' young flock, at least in the early years. He taught them Jesus' words. He preached to the gathered crowds. He protected them from wolves. And in a few decades, he would give his life for them and for the Savior he loved. Jesus alludes to it in his last comments:

**John 21:18-19** <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."*

Jesus is prophesying his friend's death – not only the fact that he will die, but even the manner. It's a reference to crucifixion. When the time came, some 30 years later, Peter was stretched out, lifted up, and crucified just like his Savior. Thirty years is a long time to anticipate your

own death. Somewhere along the line, Peter decided what he would do. Knowing it was coming but too humble to die in the same manner as his Savior, Peter requested that his torturers stretch out his hands upside down.

Friend, if you love Him, serve Him. Peter responded. How is He calling you?

### **3. Our brokenness, not our strength, makes us useful.**

Peter was the leader, and rightly so. He surpassed the other disciples in so many ways. And it's true even in this, his sin. No one rose higher and no one fell further.

It seems he needed to learn this lesson in order to be truly useful—that it's our weakness that makes us useful to the Savior. When Jesus first called Simon, He predicted a new name and a new identity for him: "You ARE Simon. You WILL BE Cephas." It means "stone," and its Greek equivalent is Peter. Over the years of their friendship, Jesus made him into a stone, a useful piece of building material. As He had done with Abraham, God committed Himself to build this man into something great—a new nation through whom God intended to bless the whole world. And that he was broken, he was ready.

It's the paradox of Christian usefulness, friends: weakness through strength. Our cracks make us useful. Our brokenness makes us powerful. Why? Because God loves to use brokenness to show His strength. It's an old familiar story, this tale of strength through weakness. It's how the gospel always works. God redeems the world, not through a show of strength, but by becoming weak.

Here's where we leave them. Jesus and Peter, standing beside the shore of the very same lake where Jesus first called him. That was the day Jesus showed Peter the Sea of Galilee still had fish in it. And now He has done it again. But now, it's a very different fisherman standing there beside the Savior. He's prepared to fish for men and women. He's ready to feed and tend the flock of Jesus. He's prepared and ready, because he knows it's brokenness, not strength, that makes him useful. It's love, not perfect faith, that brings him close. And it's his actions, not his

words, that will change the world. Friend, are you broken? Do you love Him? Will you serve Him?

***[transition to Lord's Supper]***

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