

The Great Inquisitor
John 21:15-17
March 18, 2018

Peter is still reeling from the events of the last few days. He has not only denied Jesus, but he idly stood by as he saw Christ suffer and die. And with Him, all of Peter's dreams had died as well.

So Peter went back to find some comfort in his old way of life. He had fished all night long and caught nothing. At daybreak Jesus asked, "You don't have any fish, do you?" Or He might well have asked, "How is your return to normalcy going?" Jesus knew that once a person has ever experienced a close relationship with God nothing else will ever suffice.

Soon, when their nets were full of fish, the disciples realized the man on the shore was Jesus. Peter wrapped his outer garment around his waist and dove into the water. The disciples and Jesus had breakfast together that morning, but Jesus was more interested in having a conversation with Peter. Here is our question, or in this instance, here is our three questions.

John 21:15-17 CSB

¹⁵ When they had eaten breakfast, Jesus asked Simon Peter, "Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?" "Yes, Lord," he said to him, "you know that I love you." "Feed my lambs," he told him. ¹⁶ A second time he asked him, "Simon, son of John, do you love me?" "Yes, Lord," he said to him, "you know that I love you." "Shepherd my sheep," he told him. ¹⁷ He asked him the third time, "Simon, son of John, do you love me?" Peter was grieved that he asked him the third time, "Do you love me?" He said, "Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you." "Feed my sheep," Jesus said.

In these questions Jesus is encouraging Peter to make a fresh start. How do we do that?

Reassess your position - "Simon..."

Note that Jesus does not refer to him with the name He had affixed to Simon at Caesarea Philippi. It had been evident through the crisis of Christ's denial and death that Simon was not ready to live up to his name. The crisis had revealed his level of devotion to Christ.

And that's ok. The Christ life, as we have stated before, is not about attaining. It is all about pursuing.

Reset your purpose - "do you love me?"

It is in these moments of crisis that we take our eyes off our purpose. Peter's purpose was never to defend Jesus. It was never even to be the leader of the disciples. No, those desires grew out of his love for Jesus. Now Simon was floundering because he had forgotten his purpose. So Jesus continued to ask him: "Simon, do you love Me?"

Christ was using the Greek word "agape" for love. It is the highest and holiest form of love. But Peter could only answer, "Yes, Lord you know that I "phileo" you. "I love you like a brother. In Christ's final question to Simon He uses the same word as His disciple, "Do you love Me like a brother?"

David Watson was a gifted writer and preacher from England in the '80's. He was suffering greatly from a respiratory disease. His body was racked with pain and was becoming weak. At 1 A.M. one morning he wrote, *"For two hours I could hardly breath. For two hours I cried out to God to speak to me. God spoke to me so powerfully and painfully for two hours that I had never felt so broken before Him. He showed me that all my preaching and writing was absolutely nothing compared to my love relationship with Him. It was the most painful purging and pruning time in my life. He compelled me to seek His face above all else. I am not now clinging to physical life. I am now ready to go and be with Christ forever. I have once again experienced His perfect love, a love that casts out all fear."*

Those were the last words he ever wrote. To the church at Ephesus Christ said, But I have this against you; You have abandoned your first love." (Revelation 3:4)

Realign your priorities - "more than these."

The gospel writer does not specify what "these" are. Was it the other disciples? Was it fishing? Was it his family? It does not matter. Jesus wanted to know if He was Simon's highest priority. Often when we have lost our faith in God it is because other things have crowded Him out. To start fresh we have to put God back in His rightful place in our lives.

Application

If you need a fresh start do not lose heart.

Our faith needs a fresh start when God does not meet our expectations.

Most everyone I have talked to have abandoned their faith during one of two times in their life.

When God remained silent during a sudden crisis in their life or they endured a prolonged period when God remind silent as their faith slowly ebbed away. In either case God did not respond in a way they expected.

The waiting is difficult. The waiting was so difficult for Peter that he could not wait for the boat to reach the shore. He could swim faster than the boat could move. But in attempting to go back to the old way of life he found it even more fruitless and painful. He longed to have fellowship with Christ again.

Fresh starts benefit from past failures.

Think about learning to ride a bike. You probably fell a few times before you became competent to leave the yard. But the excitement of those moments of balancing on two wheels with the wind in your hair motivated you to try again.

We recently lost the greatest evangelist the world has ever known. Billy Graham passed away leaving a legacy of millions who now have a faith in Christ. Do you know the name of Charles Templeton? He and Billy Graham were close friends at the end of WW II. Both were preachers. Both had a crisis of faith. Billy wasn't sure he could trust the Bible as true and Charles had doubts about God. Billy held on to the faith he had and God used him mightily. Charles lost his faith and became an agnostic and unknown. Just before his death in 2001 Lee Stroebel interviewed him for his book, "The Case for Faith." Stroebel asked Templeton what he now thought of Christ.

"Uh . . . but . . . no," he said slowly, "he's the most . . ." He stopped, then started again. "In my view," he declared, "he is the most important human being who has ever existed."

That's when Templeton uttered the words I never expected to hear from him. "And if I may put it this way," he said as his voice began to crack, "I . . . miss . . . him!"