

## The Bible in One Year Week 22: Peter (John Pt. 7)

(John 21:1-25)

### • Endings Are Important

- Today, I want to talk to you about something that affects *every single one of us* if we are followers of Jesus or if we are thinking about becoming followers of Jesus. It's just this: *Your failures and feelings of inadequacy do not disqualify you from being a follower of Jesus or serving his mission.* How do we know? Because of the story we're looking at today. We're finishing the Gospel of John (next week, we start Acts!) and we're looking how he ends the whole thing.
  - Endings are important, right? Think of your favorite movies, or books, or pieces of music: every section is significant, but the way it ends is really important. A really good ending can *make* the movie or story, and a bad ending can ruin it. How a creator chooses to end a story says a lot about what they're trying to say and what they want us to do with it.
- So, think back to the first week we began John's Gospel: do you remember how we compared the four different Gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John? We talked a bit about how they tell the same basic story and give the same basic message, but in wonderfully diverse and unique ways that actually *enhance* our understanding of Jesus. Well, you can see the same differences when you compare the endings of each Gospel. John's ending is unique. Let's look at the others:
  - Matthew ends with the epic *Great Commission* of Jesus. It's powerful, it's satisfying, it's inspiring: *"All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."* Wow! How's that for a finale?
  - Mark is short and to the point: *"Then the disciples went out and preached everywhere, and the Lord worked with them and confirmed his word by the signs that accompanied it."* That is what happened, and it's a cool ending!
  - Then there's Luke's Gospel: Luke made a two-part series, it starts with the Gospel then continues with Acts. So, it sets you up for the sequel: *"When he had led them out to the vicinity of Bethany, he lifted up his hands and blessed them. While he was blessing them, he left them and was taken up into heaven. Then they worshiped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy. And they stayed continually at the temple, praising God."* Yup, that ties things up, good.
  - So, John's Gospel: how does he end the story? Well, in chapter 20 he kind of does the same thing as the others: Jesus is risen from the dead, women meet him at the tomb, he appears to his disciples, talks to them some, and then John says, *"Jesus performed many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name."* And that seems like it would be a good ending, doesn't it? Like, fade to black, let the credits roll, we're good to go! But then...we fade in again, to *another* scene. Oh. What's this? *"Afterward Jesus appeared again to his disciples, by the sea of Galilee..."*
- We get this story of the guys going out to fish, then Jesus shows up to surprise them and have breakfast. Then it goes into this remarkable conversation with Jesus and Peter. And finally, it says, *"Jesus did many other things as well. If every one of them were written down, I suppose that even the whole world would not have room for the books that would be written."* Well, that's a really cool line to finish with, but the overall epilogue is sort of anti-climactic. It doesn't exactly leave you wanting to charge out and change the world. It sort of leaves you thinking about the disciples' failures and the suffering they'd face. Why does John end it this way? Well, that's the question we're going to dig into in order to flesh out the first point I led off with—and to do that, we need to look more at the character most of this final story centers on: Peter.
- Peter's Story
  - Peter's character is really interesting in all the Gospels—you get a pretty similar impression of him in each one, and you get more details about his character than any of the other disciples.

He's meant to be *the disciple, the* key leader of this movement Jesus is starting—and that is what happens, eventually. But I think we can all relate to him as we try to follow Jesus: we want to lead with our best foot forward, we have intentions to give him our all—he deserves it!—but sometimes, when the rubber meets the road, we bottom out. We get it wrong at least half as much as we get it right. Peter is loud. Peter is outspoken. Peter is passionate. Peter is impulsive. Peter is flawed. And Peter is one of the people Jesus chose to lead his movement. To feed his sheep.

- To understand the significance of this conversation at the end of John, we have to remember where it came from and think about how Peter must have been feeling. Remember that just a few chapters before, and a few days or weeks before this conversation by the sea of Galilee, Peter was there with Jesus and the others in the Upper Room. And when Jesus told them that things are going to get bad, that someone is going to betray him, and that he's going to be going away where they cannot yet follow, Peter is the first to blurt out, "*Lord why can't I follow you now? I will lay down my life for you!*" And right there, Jesus silences him: "*Will you really lay down your life for me? Very truly I tell you, before the rooster crows, you will disown me three times!*" Wow. That'll dampen the mood.
- Well, at that point the conversation continues with the whole "Upper Room Discourse" that we talked about last week. And then, as Jesus gets arrested and put on trial and sentenced to death, we get to the moment when these ominous words come true. The rest of the disciples have fled, but John and Peter have followed him to where the trial is. It says John was allowed to come inside to watch what was happening, because he was known to the high priest, but Peter stayed out on the outskirts. Now, this story of Peter's denial is one of the stories that occurs *in all four Gospels*, including John. And all four have the same details—he's by a fire, he disowns Jesus not one, not two, *but three times*, and then the rooster crows and he remembers what Jesus predicted—amazing.
- But here in John, there's this little word, this little *extra* detail, that I never noticed until now. In John, who you remember *never* wastes words, he says that it's a *charcoal* fire, or a fire of coals. Ok. Odd detail to remember. But then, at the very end, it becomes clear why he shared this detail. In the end, when Jesus comes to the shore, and they realize it's him because of the miraculous catch of fish, Peter—impulsive as always—jumps off and swims to shore. What do they find on shore? Jesus is there, already with his own breakfast cooking—over a *charcoal fire*. So, right there is a clue to what's going to happen next. Listen to what N.T. Wright observes:
  - "*It all happens beside a charcoal fire. Think back to the smell of that fire, wafting through the chilly April air. Think of Peter going out in shame, angry with himself, knowing that Jesus knew. Knowing that the beloved disciple knew...that God knew. And hearing the next day what had happened to Jesus. Not even the resurrection itself could wave a magic wand and get rid of that memory. Nothing could, except revisiting it and bathing it in God's own healing.*"
- Imagine all that must have been going through Peter's mind in the time between Jesus' Crucifixion and Resurrection, and in the time between Jesus' Resurrection and this conversation. Betrayal is a terrible, terrible thing. Have you ever felt what it feels like to be genuinely *betrayed*? Have you ever felt what it feels like to *betray* someone else? Someone who put their trust in you, someone who depended on you, someone who you looked up to, who you never wanted to disappoint? Now, imagine that someone who you betrayed is not just anyone, but the most important person to ever live—the Messiah, the Son of God, the Savior of the world—and that someone has said that you're going to be the key leader of their movement? Yup, that's Peter. I'm not sure which feels more terrible: to be betrayed by someone you love, or to be the one to betray someone you love. I'm not sure I want to find out.
  - Peter has to feel conflicted: totally elated that Jesus is alive. Wondering what all of it means and what comes next. And wondering...*does he still want me? Can he still use me? Surely it can't ever be the same and I can never follow through with what he originally wanted me to do?*
  - And then, as they bring it all these fish and greet Jesus and start breakfast, Jesus takes Peter aside. What is going to happen? What is he going to say? There had to be so many unspoken

things going through their hearts in that moment. Who was going to speak first and what were they going to say? Well, for once, Peter doesn't speak first. He waits for Jesus to take the lead. And here's what Jesus says. He asks a question. "*Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?*" Peter says, "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you." Then Jesus responds, "Feed my lambs." Jesus asks again, "Do you love me?" And Peter says the same thing again, too, "yes, Lord, you know that I love you." Again Jesus says, "Take care of my sheep." One more time Jesus asks, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" And Peter, now feeling hurt says, maybe tears in his eyes, desperation in his voice, "Lord, you know all things; you know that I love you." Jesus says, "Feed my sheep." And then he tells him what his future will be, how he will walk a similar path as him, giving up his life to serve the work of Christ, glorifying God.

- How many times did Peter disown Jesus back there at that charcoal fire? Three times. How many times does Jesus have Peter say, "I love you," here? Three times. And how many times does Jesus give Peter a purpose to follow him and demonstrate his love, "Feed my sheep"? Three times. Jesus, in his one-of-a-kind fashion, finds the perfect way to heal and forgive and reinstate Peter to his true purpose. It's absolutely beautiful. And it says something to all of us.
- **Our Story?**
  - Why does John finish the Gospel this way? Just before this story, Jesus showed up to the disciples and commissions them to now go and serve his mission in the world. He gives them the gift of the Spirit and sends them just as the Father sent him. It's an epic commission. But then we're reminded *who it is* that he sends: it's these guys who struggled to commit, who struggled to believe, who ran away in the eleventh hour when he needed them most, who denied him, who argued with each other, who didn't know what to do now that he was alive so they went back to their old occupations to catch some fish—only they couldn't catch any. *Those are the ones Jesus sent to carry on his mission! They're just like us. Just like us.*
  - N. T. Wright again: "*Jesus...has given his followers a strange and striking commission in chapter 20. They are to work for him. They are to be filled with God's breath, and be sent into the world as Jesus had been. But if they try to do it their own way, they will fail. They will toil all night and take nothing. The only way is for them to admit defeat, to listen afresh for Jesus' voice, and to do what he says. Then there is no knowing what they will achieve. Stand in your mind's eye with the disciples in the boat. What projects have you been laboring over, getting nowhere? Watch for the dawn. Watch for the figure on the shore. Listen for his voice. And then do whatever he tells you.*"
  - He doesn't need our help. He wants it. We can rest assured he's more than capable of making it all work out, we just have to follow and trust. And it's all motivated by *love*. Anything we do to serve him, from the quietest thing behind the scenes to the greatest, most influential platform—it all comes back to that question: "Do you love me? Then follow me and feed my sheep." And it means we have to be totally surrendered to wherever he's going to lead: he's given us everything, and he asks us for everything.
  - It all comes back to this: our failures and our feelings of inadequacy do not disqualify us. He gives us a path of healing and a purpose to live. He says, "follow me." Some of us have stayed stuck, we've never gotten out of the boat, we've never gone beyond what feels comfortable, because we're ashamed of some failure. Or we're wounded by some memory. Caught in some regret. Or we're trapped by fear and inadequacy. Or whatever it might be, fill in the blank. But listen: *all that matters* is Jesus' question—*do you love me?* Until you answer that question, you can't do anything for him—there's nothing else he really wants from you until you can answer that. But if you can answer that, if you know in your heart, like Peter did, regardless of how much you've screwed this thing up—and we all have and we all do—if you know, "Lord, yes I love you," then go and follow him. Listen to what he says. And do it. Just say yes. He's calling you. And he just wants you. He wants you to love him. And then follow him. Will you? *Do you believe this?*