



TRUTH APPLICATIONS

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Peter's Comeback

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You awaken in the middle of the night, wondering where it all went wrong. You did all you could. You had the best intentions, but things are out of control. You feel like a failure in every part of life—home, work, church, everywhere! You're spent and have nothing left to give. You are demoralized, devastated, and defeated.

When we go through times like these, we need to take a breath and reach for something positive to hold on to. Often, it helps to hear about others who passed through similar valleys and emerged with stronger faith and renewed determination.

The apostle Peter is one of those people. Yes, he was a bold and committed preacher and leader who capped off his service by writing inspirational words to suffering Christians. But before he became that leader and mature counselor, he failed spectacularly. Only Jesus could restore him to favor and service.

Peter's Low Point

Our text is John 21:15-19, but to adequately understand it, we must review Peter's denials in John 18. Except for a passing mention of him running to the tomb with "the other disciple," (John 20:2 ESV), John 18 was the last passage in the gospel prior to our text to feature Peter.

Significantly, his third denial was his response to "a relative of the man whose ear Peter had cut off" (John 18:26), the man named Malchus (v. 10). Nothing more clearly shows the intensity of Peter's loyalty or how much he still misunderstood about Jesus than his action in that episode and his downward spiral after it. He had told the Lord he would go to prison and even die before he would deny Him. He also claimed he would remain loyal even if no other disciple did (John 13:37; cf. Matthew 26:33; Mark 14:29; Luke 22:31, 33). Luke said that when Peter denied Him the third time, "the Lord turned and looked at Peter" (Luke 22:61). That look caused him to see his failure and with remorse "he went outside and wept bitterly" (v. 62; cf. Matthew 26:75; Mark 14:72). Peter was demoralized, devastated, and defeated.

Reversing the Denials

As they read his gospel in light of later events, did some of John's readers wonder how Peter had overcome his failure? What about the disciples who had been with him in the upper room? Were

some reluctant to take him back? We have no way to definitively answer these questions, but human nature being as it is, we would not be surprised if someone expressed such sentiments.

John 21:15-19 shows how Jesus graciously helped Peter come back. Just as there were three denials, Jesus asked Peter three times to affirm his love for Him. Each time, Jesus commissioned him to care for His flock (cf. John 10:1-30). “Feed my lambs” (v. 15). “Tend my sheep” (v. 16). “Feed my sheep” (v. 17). Peter’s affirmations and Jesus’ commissions had the effect of demonstrating that, in spite of his dismal failure, Jesus was restoring Peter to a place of trust and leadership.

Notice that Jesus initiated the conversation, asking, “Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?” (v. 15). In the context, “more than these” is ambiguous. Bearing in mind that Jesus, Peter, and six others had just finished breakfast after a miraculous catch of 152 fish (vv. 1-14), it is possible that Jesus was asking whether Peter loved Him more than he loved the other men. Or He could have been inquiring whether he loved Him more than “these things,” that is, the food they had eaten or the boat and nets they had used to catch the fish. Both would need to be secondary among Peter’s priorities if he would strive first for the kingdom from then on. If Jesus intended to ask about either of these matters, He was in effect asking if Peter was willing to recommit himself to leave everything to follow Him (cf. Matthew 4:18-20; Mark 1:16-18; Luke 5:1-11).

But I think a third possibility is more likely, that in saying “more than these,” Jesus was asking if Peter was still willing to claim that his love for Him was greater than the love of the other disciples. Just as the three affirmations of love correspond to Peter’s denials, this understanding aligns Jesus’ question with Peter’s previous brash declaration that his resolve was superior to theirs (cf. John 13:37).

Whatever Jesus’ intent, Peter’s response showed he had changed. His bravado was gone, replaced with humble submission. The Greek grammatical construction in verses 15-17 is emphatic. In each of Peter’s replies there is both a second person pronoun and the second person verb ending. We could literally translate, “You, you know that I love you” (vv. 15, 16) and “Lord, you, you know all things; you, you know that I love you” (v. 17). That Peter wanted to emphasize his replies in this way is supported by John’s comment that, after the third question, “Peter was grieved because he said to him the third time, ‘Do you love me?’” (v. 17).

With Peter’s cocky self-assurance no longer an obstacle to service, Jesus told him to shepherd His sheep, but also to expect to take up his cross (cf. Matthew 10:38; 16:24; etc.). The time would come when he would be at the mercy of others, no longer free to decide where he would go. In his old age, he would be required to “stretch out [his] hands.” Although the evidence for it is not overwhelming and it may not be an expression which goes back to the time of Jesus, we know that some in the ancient church took this phrase to refer to crucifixion. That the phrase can be taken this way in this text finds support in John’s report that Jesus said it “to show by what kind of death [Peter] was to glorify God” (John 21:19; cf. 12:32-33).¹

Ready for Service

Peter’s audacious claim that he would never deny Him was not the first time he presumed to think he knew more about how to follow Jesus than Jesus did (cf. Mark 8:27-33). But, except for

¹ See Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1995), 773. Also *Barnabas* 12.4; Justin Martyr, *First Apology* 35.

occasional missteps (cf. John 21:21; Acts 10:14-15; Galatians 2:11-14), it was the last time. He acknowledged that Jesus knew him better than he knew himself (John 21:15-17) and until his death he allowed Jesus to reign over every part of his life.

To do that, Peter had to suppress his ego, acknowledge his failure, and accept Jesus' restorative grace. He had to let Jesus determine the direction for his life instead of trusting his own thinking. He had to completely surrender to serving. Furthermore, he had to understand that his life would not be easy, a point John emphasized by saying that Jesus intended to show Peter "by what kind of death he was to glorify God" (John 21:19).

How well did Peter do? Fast forward approximately thirty years after the events of John 21 and read the words of the man who had once failed so miserably as he encouraged second-generation disciples facing persecution. "Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you.... If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed ... If anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in that name" (1 Peter 4:12, 14, 16).

Constant in Service

We who have declared our allegiance to Jesus as Lord (Romans 10:9) are called to do as Peter did. We continually acknowledge that we must rely on the Lord's knowledge to direct our lives, not on our own limited understanding (Jeremiah 10:23). Consequently, we reject the commonly accepted "wisdom" that is "earthly, unspiritual [and] demonic" and leads to the "jealousy and selfish ambition" that characterize people who are arrogant and averse to the truth. Instead, we pursue "the wisdom from above" that was evident in the character modeled by Jesus Himself, the wisdom that is "first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere" (James 3:13-17; cf. 1 Corinthians 1:30). Aware that allegiance to Jesus does not guarantee freedom from trouble (cf. 1 Peter 4:12-19), we offer ourselves as living sacrifices who yield to His transforming power (Romans 12:1-2; cf. 1 Peter 2:5, 11).

We will inevitably falter (cf. 1 John 1:8-9), but when we do, we also learn from Peter that our failures need not lead to demoralization, devastation, and defeat. Jesus will accept our penitent affirmations of love. He will continue to commission us for service. He will keep reassuring us with the same promise He left with Peter and his brothers: "behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age" (Matthew 28:20).

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