JESUS REINSTATES PETER

John 21:1–25

Key Verse: 21:15

“When they had finished eating, Jesus said to Simon Peter, ‘Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?’ ‘Yes, Lord,’ he said, ‘you know that I love you.’ Jesus said, ‘Feed my lambs.’”

Have you ever failed at something big? Not just on a test, or to fix something, but failed at something important? Like in a relationship, or at a crucial task? For most people, failure is so hard to deal with. In today’s passage the Risen Jesus meets his disciples after they had totally failed at following him. Though they’d already met the Risen Jesus, this problem lingered in their hearts. Jesus especially speaks with Peter, who, despite all his passion to follow him, had denied him three times. We want to learn from this encounter how people can be restored from failure. We want to learn why Jesus was so determined to restore Peter. We want to learn more of Jesus’ heart, and of how he sees people. And we want to learn how we can show our love for him. May God open our hearts and speak to us through his word today.

Look at verse 1. Here the word “appeared” in Greek is literally “revealed himself,” and it’s repeated twice in verse 1, and again in verse 14. The disciples had lived with Jesus for three and a half years. They’d seen and heard all he said and did. After his death and resurrection, he revealed to them that he had risen, showing them the places in his hands and side where he’d been pierced on the cross. But now he’s still revealing himself to them. The Bible uses an expression “the unsearchable riches of Christ,” meaning perhaps the depths of his wisdom, character and blessings (Eph3:8). Apostle Paul, after serving Jesus for many years, still said, “I want to know Christ” (Php3:10). It means there’s a lot to reveal about Jesus. His revealing himself now was not just in a general sense, or to prove again that he’d risen. In chapter 21 he reveals something wonderful. The author wrote about him: “We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth” (1:14b). In this last chapter of John Jesus is revealing his glory. What is it? It’s his grace that restores even the worst failures. The word “reveal” means it’s not about knowing some information; it’s about experiencing Jesus in this most profound way.

Verse 1 says the location was “the Sea of Galilee.” It’s where Jesus had first called his disciples, and where they had many beautiful memories of being with him during his ministry. Now that the Passover Feast was over, Jesus’ followers had for the most part returned to Galilee, where they were from. They knew firsthand that Jesus had died on a cross and risen from the dead, and they heard Jesus tell them what they were to do. Jesus clearly said he was sending them into the world, just as the Father had sent him (20:21; cf. 17:18). He told them to receive the Holy Spirit and share with people the good news of the forgiveness of sins (20:22,23). But the disciples were not doing that. What were they doing? Look at verses 2,3. Basically, they’d gone back to their old lives as fishermen. There were only seven of them together now; the Bible doesn’t say where the others were. But Jesus knew in advance that something like this would happen. While he was giving his disciples his final teachings just before his arrest, he told them, “A time is coming and in fact has come when you will be scattered, each to his own home. You will leave me all alone” (16:32). Their scattering happened not just during his crucifixion, but now, after his resurrection.

What was the disciples’ problem? It all seems to stem from Peter. In verse 3 he told the others, “I’m going out to fish.” At first, his statement doesn’t seem like such a big deal. But if we really think about it, it shows that Peter had lost his spiritual direction. He’d been following Jesus as his top disciple, but now that Jesus was gone, Peter didn’t know what to do. He especially found it hard to recover after denying Jesus three times. After doing something we know is wrong, we too begin to despise and hate ourselves; we feel hopeless, and we give up. Peter must have been feeling all these things, but he wasn’t the kind of person to just sit around in despair. He needed to do something. Maybe he was hungry, maybe he felt he needed to take care of his family, maybe he was bored. In any case, he defaulted to what he knew: fishing. And the others just followed him, saying, “We’ll go with you.” Though he didn’t think we was qualified to lead anyone anymore, Peter was still influencing the others.

What happened? It says, “So they went out and got into the boat, but that night they caught nothing” (3b). Now people go in the morning, but in those times people went fishing overnight. It was considered the best time for fishing, and they could present fresh fish in the market the next morning. But despite their efforts all night, they caught nothing. They’d failed as disciples, and now they’d failed even as fishermen. It’s embarrassing to fail at what we can usually do, or at what others can do easily. Maybe they felt like God was not pleased with them anymore. But whenever we try to do something with our own efforts, not depending on Jesus, we find out that we too can do nothing (15:5).

Look at verse 4. When they were at their worst, it was then that Jesus came. His standing on the shore to meet them early in the morning shows his faithfulness to them, even though they’d turned away from him. But he didn’t reveal himself fully right away. Probably because their boat was so far from shore, they couldn’t see who he was. What did he do? Look at verses 5,6. He calls them “Friends”; literally the word is “Children.” It’s not just that he sees them as much younger than him; he sees them as weak as little children. He knows they’re depressed and upset, but he encourages them to try again, one more time. The disciples have no idea who this man is, and they must be really tired, but they go ahead and throw out their net anyway. And they’re totally shocked: they can’t even get the net back in the boat because of the large number of fish. Without Jesus, empty net; with Jesus, too much blessing to handle.

How do the disciples react? Look at verse 7. The disciple whom Jesus loved is the author John himself. He recognized Jesus first, probably because he remembered that Jesus had done something very similar when he first called them (Lk5:1–11). And Peter suddenly springs into action. He puts his outer garment on, out of respect for Jesus, and throws himself into the water to swim to shore and see him, leaving the others behind in the boat to deal with the net (8). Though he’d been so dark, so discouraged, seeing Jesus again gave him such joy. Look at verse 9. What does this mean? It means that Jesus himself had prepared a hot breakfast for them. It’s easy to just take this for granted; of course Jesus would serve them, like he always had. But it’s actually really hard to serve people who’ve left us when we really needed them. In the military, deserters are shot. But Jesus, though he is the Risen Lord, and they have abandoned him, is making breakfast for them.

What happens next? Look at verses 10,11. It wasn’t just about getting more food for a big breakfast for these men. Jesus wanted to reinforce that it was him who helped them catch all those fish. Fishermen usually carefully counted the number of fish they caught. This huge number, 153, was a detail that only an eyewitness would remember. It probably means nothing more than the great blessing Jesus had brought them when they had failed. Even though we totally don’t deserve it, Jesus still wants to restore all kinds of failures in our lives—not just to make us successful, but to draw us closer to him. We notice that Peter drags that net full of large fish to shore, all by himself. It shows how strong he was, as well as his great enthusiasm to obey Jesus. The author adds how surprising it was that the net didn’t tear—another testimony to this miracle of Jesus. It wasn’t Peter’s strength or skill; only Jesus could hold all that together.

The disciples were amazed by the catch of fish, but they seem to be even more amazed by what they encounter on shore. Look at verse 12. Here Jesus is like a mom who welcomes her hungry children to a hearty breakfast. His voice must have been full of affection and gladness to see them. Though they’d given up on themselves, Jesus didn’t give up. The disciples were stunned. Surely they were glad to have so many fish, glad to have such a wonderful breakfast waiting for them. But what they were really focused on was that this was the Lord. It was Jesus who’d been with them, who died and rose again, and who was still loving them, even when they least deserved it. Look at verse 13. It emphasizes that Jesus personally fed them. It was his personal love and provision, and it shows that only he can restore and sustain. Jesus had loved his disciples at first, when he first called them; he loved them when he had personally washed their feet; now he loves them even after they all had failed him badly. Through this breakfast Jesus wanted them to experience more deeply his grace—his unfailing, unconditional love for them. Only in his grace could they find their way and restore their direction and their strength.

In verses 15–19 Jesus turns his attention to one person among them, Peter. After eating, he asks him, “Do you love me more than these?” What did Jesus mean by “more than these”? Some think he meant “more than the fish.” But he really seems to mean “more than the other disciples.” By what he said and did in the past, Peter gave the impression that he loved Jesus more than all the others. When Jesus was washing the disciples’ feet and came to Peter, Peter stopped him, saying, “You shall never wash my feet.” He meant, “I love you too much to let you do such a thing for me.” When Jesus insisted, Peter exclaimed, “Then not just my feet but my hands and my head as well!” Later that night, Jesus told his disciples, “Where I am going, you cannot follow now, but you will follow later.” Then Peter asked, “Lord, why can’t I follow you now? I will lay down my life for you” (13:6–9,36,37). Peter was sure of himself, sure he loved Jesus the most. But after denying Jesus three times, his self-confidence had been shattered.

How does Peter reply? He says, “Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.” It sounds rather simple, but things have changed. Now the emphasis is not on his confidence in himself, but on Jesus, on what Jesus knows. Basically he’s saying, “You know my heart.” He can no longer boast that he loves Jesus the most, but he confesses that he does love Jesus. Peter was probably hoping this would end this topic of conversation. But Jesus ends it by saying, “Feed my lambs.” He means, “If you really love me, feed my lambs.”

Who are “his lambs”? He’s talking about not animals but people. In chapter 10 Jesus gave his famous parable of the good shepherd and his sheep. Of course, only Jesus could be the good shepherd, because only Jesus laid down his life for the sheep (10:11). The Bible calls Jesus “that great Shepherd of the sheep” and “the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls” (Heb13:20; 1Pe2:25). But clearly he wants all his disciples to be shepherds of his sheep as well. But why compare human beings to lambs? Lambs are baby sheep; they’re very gentle and lovely. But lambs have many weaknesses and make many mistakes. They easily go astray and get lost. They can’t remember the way. They’re in desperate need of a shepherd to guide them. Still, they’re so cute. Caring for lambs can be exhausting, but their cuteness factor redeems them. We all, like sheep, go astray, and each of us turns to our own way (Isa53:6a). But Jesus wants Peter and us to see wandering people as Jesus’ lambs.

He also wants Peter to renew his mission to “feed” them. He’s not talking about literal food; he means to give them the word of God. God’s word is like food for our souls that helps us grow spiritually (1Pe1:23–2:2). Peter himself had just been fed by Jesus. He’d enjoyed Jesus’ grace and love. But now Jesus wants Peter to love him back, and do it practically, by taking responsibility to feed his lambs. It tells us that loving Jesus means having a two-way relationship with him, not only receiving from him all the time, but also giving to him. And it’s not about just getting emotional, but about doing what Jesus wants. Jesus doesn’t stop there. Look at verse 16. Jesus repeats the same thing again. This time he says, “Take care of my sheep.” Literally it means not only to feed but also to watch over and guide them. By repeating it, he’s emphasizing how important it is, and he’s going deeper into how Peter can carry out his God-given task.

And look at verse 17. The third time he said, “Simon son of John, do you love me?” This time Jesus changes the word he’s using for love. In Greek he’s been saying “agape,” but this time he uses the word Peter himself has been using, “phileo.” Agape love means great, self-sacrificing love; phileo means just friendly love. So this time, Jesus seems to be asking Peter, “Are you even my friend?” And it says Peter is hurt because Jesus is asking the third time. Literally, “hurt” means “grieved.” Peter is grieving because by asking three times, Jesus is reminding him of his three-fold denial. Jesus is speaking truth to Peter not to hurt him, but because he wants a true love relationship. For that to happen, Peter has to know himself. He has to face himself and what he’s done. In fact, Peter had not loved Jesus; he had really loved himself. He had saved himself when he should have followed Jesus. He had not even been a real friend to Jesus when he needed him most. Jesus asked him three times, not with a love that spoils, but with a holy love, to help him repent. 2 Corinthians 7:10a says, “Godly sorrow leads to repentance that leaves no regret.” It’s only through recognizing our sinfulness and repenting that real love for Jesus can grow in our hearts.

And why is Jesus having this conversation with Peter? It’s because he has a great hope for him. He hopes that Peter will become a true shepherd for his flock—not like a hired hand who runs away at the first sign of danger. The whole point of Jesus’ discipleship ministry was to raise Peter and the others as real shepherds of people, shepherds who feed, protect and care for people until they experience Jesus’ grace and truth personally. Peter had given up, but Jesus never gave up this hope for him.

We learn something else important here. Why should we feed and care for others spiritually? To impress people? To do somebody a favor? Jesus tells us why: it should be done purely out of love for him. 1 John 4:19 says, “We love because he first loved us.” Only because Jesus loves me can I truly love others. In other words, we first have to experience Jesus’ great love for us, despite all our sins and failures. Then we can really begin to love. Only then can we see others not as a duty or a burden, but as those for whom Jesus died. Only then can we see others as those in desperate need of a good shepherd, as those who really need the great love of God, which alone can satisfy their souls.

In verses 18,19 Jesus told Peter about the kind of death he would die. His death would show his ultimate love for Jesus and for his sheep. Church tradition says that Peter was crucified in Rome, upside down, for his faith in Jesus. Peter had failed in following Jesus when he depended on himself. But when he learned to depend on Jesus and his great love for him, he could truly follow Jesus and glorify God by dying like Jesus did. At this time, there was still rivalry between Peter and John. But Jesus taught him and us not to worry about what others are doing, but just to focus on following Jesus myself, each and every day (20–22).

In this passage Jesus revealed his glory, his great love that never gives up on sinners. May God restore each one of us in this great love of Jesus for us personally, and in his great hope for us to live as shepherds for his flock.