

Peter's Spiritual Crisis: A Willing Spirit with Weak Flesh

I. FOUNDATIONAL TRUTHS: WHAT WE THINK ABOUT JESUS

- A. Jesus asked the disciples the foundation question for the church, “Who do you say I am?” The most foundational issue is to encounter the truth about Jesus’ mission and personality.
- ¹³He asked His disciples, saying, “Who do men say that I, the Son of Man, am?” ¹⁴They said, “Some say John the Baptist, some Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” ¹⁵He said to them, “But who do you say that I am?” ¹⁶Simon Peter answered and said, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” ¹⁷Jesus answered and said to him, “Blessed are you, Simon... ¹⁸I also say to you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build My church....” (Mt. 16:13-18)***
- B. Some saw Jesus as a man like *John the Baptist*, a fiery holiness preacher, or *Elijah* with great power to confront the powers of darkness, or *Jeremiah* who was known as the weeping prophet.
- C. God’s personality is filled with passion and pleasure for His people, even in their weakness. As we understand this, then *we run to Him instead of from Him*, even when we discover the weakness of our flesh. Jesus is tender towards us even in our spiritual immaturity.
- D. Jesus gave Simon a new name, calling him the Aramaic name *Cephas*, meaning a rock or stone (Jn. 1:42). Jesus called him Peter or the Greek name *Petros*, meaning a rock (Mt. 16:18). This name emphasized Peter’s *stability and reliability in leadership*. Jesus gave him this name knowing that he would deny Him as well as yield to the fear of man as in Antioch (Gal. 2:11-14).
- ¹¹Now when Peter had come to Antioch, I withstood him to his face, because he was to be blamed; ¹²for before certain men came from James, he would eat with the Gentiles; but when they came, he withdrew and separated himself, fearing those who were of the circumcision [Jewish leaders]. ¹³The rest of the Jews also played the hypocrite with him... ¹⁴But when I saw that they were not straightforward about the truth of the gospel... (Gal. 2:11-14)***
- E. Our most sincere efforts to love God are flawed and fragile. We have a greater capacity for sin than we comprehend. Who can know the depth of sin of which we are capable?
- ⁹The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked; who can know it? (Jer. 17:9)***
- F. The human heart was created with a longing for the assurance that we are enjoyed by God. Our life is revolutionized as we see how Jesus feels about sincere believers in their immaturity and struggle with sin. The enemy wants to convince us that Jesus is exasperated with us when we fail.
- G. God has made a way for this deep longing in us to be fulfilled while we are yet immature. He enjoys us, not just after we are fully mature in heaven, but He actually enjoys us during our spiritual journey. He likes us while we are growing, not only after we grow. Most can imagine God enjoying us in heaven, but cannot imagine Him enjoying us in our immaturity in this life.
- H. Many who are sincere are paralyzed by shame in their relationship with Jesus. A life of shame leads to a life of sin. If we feel dirty before God, then we will live dirty.

II. PETER'S JOURNEY OF DISCOVERY

- A. Jesus told Peter that he would deny Him. Peter had more confidence in his commitment to Jesus than in Jesus' commitment to him. This is the essence of legalism and a religious spirit.
- ³¹Jesus said to them, "All of you will be made to stumble because of Me this night..."*
- ³³Peter answered and said to Him, "Even if all are made to stumble because of You, I will never be made to stumble." ³⁴Jesus said to him, "Assuredly, I say to you that this night, before the rooster crows, you will deny Me three times." ³⁵Peter said to Him, "Even if I have to die with You, I will not deny You!" (Mt. 26:31-35)*
- B. Peter sought to stand before Jesus based on *his promise* to Jesus that he would not stumble. In our spiritual pride, we may seek to contribute to why God loves us and to motive Him to love us more. Jesus does not relate to us based on our promises not to stumble again in a specific area.
- C. Jesus informed Peter that Satan wanted to sift him as wheat to reveal the chaff in his life. Jesus warned him that he would deny Him, but that his faith would not fail because He prayed for him.
- ³¹"Satan has asked for you, that he may sift you as wheat. ³²But I have prayed for you, that your faith should not fail; and when you have returned to Me, strengthen your brethren..." ³⁴Peter, the rooster shall not crow...before you will deny...that you know Me." (Lk. 22:31-34)*
- D. Jesus told Peter that he would deny Him, but that his faith would not fail (Lk. 22:31-34). There is a vast difference between stumbling in sin and failing in our faith. Stumbling refers to a short-term compromise. Failing speaks of quitting or giving up our wholehearted pursuit of God and giving up on our vision to walk in the fullness of God's calling on our life.
- E. Later that night, Jesus gave Peter a twofold description of how the heart of the redeemed operates in God's grace. Jesus told Peter that his spirit was willing, but his flesh was weak. A willing spirit speaks of the sincere desire of God's people to obey Him.
- ⁴¹The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak. (Mt. 26:41)*
- F. God is not surprised by our sin, even when we are. We may fear that the Lord will draw back in His relationship with us and in His calling on our life.
- ⁵⁶A certain servant girl...said, "This man was also with Him." ⁵⁷But he denied Him...⁵⁸After a little while another...said, "You also are of them." But Peter said, "Man, I am not!" ⁵⁹Then after about an hour had passed, another confidently affirmed, saying, "Surely this fellow also was with Him..." ⁶⁰But Peter said, "Man, I do not know what you are saying!" Immediately, while he was still speaking, the rooster crowed. ⁶¹And the Lord turned and looked at Peter. And Peter remembered the word of the Lord, how He had said to him, "Before the rooster crows, you will deny Me three times." ⁶²So Peter went out and wept bitterly. (Lk. 22:56-62)*
- G. The battle for our faith is waged in understanding what God is thinking and feeling about us when we discover the weakness of our own flesh. This is where the crisis of our faith happens.

- H. An angel told Mary Magdalene to tell Peter that Jesus was going to speak to him in Galilee.
⁵*Entering the tomb, they [several women] saw a young man clothed in a long white robe...*
⁶*But he said to them, "...You seek Jesus of Nazareth...He is risen..."*⁷*Go, tell His disciples and Peter that He is going before you into Galilee; there you will see Him." (Mk. 16:5-7)*
- I. In the crisis of discovering our sinful flesh, some determine it is too painful to reach for the highest things in God because they believe they will constantly fail. Therefore, they give up on walking in wholehearted obedience. Some would rather resign than face failing over and over.
1. They lower their vision in God so that they do not feel the pain of failing. For some, it is easier to settle for living in a "second-class relationship" with God, rather than face the pain of failure that goes with having a life vision to love God with all our heart.
 2. They cannot face relating to God with shame. They imagine that God is so disappointed with them that He will no longer entrust them with the responsibility He once gave them.

III. PETER WENT FISHING: HIS QUEST FOR A SPIRITUAL COMFORT ZONE

- A. Jesus visited Peter in Galilee as He promised.
³*Peter said to them, "I am going fishing." They said to him, "We are going with you also." They...got into the boat, and that night they caught nothing.*⁴*But when the morning had now come, Jesus stood on the shore; yet the disciples did not know that it was Jesus. (Jn. 21:3-4)*
- B. Peter did not go fishing because they ran out of money. This was only eight days after the crucifixion. They had enough money that Judas could steal it without being caught. Yet Peter was not fishing for recreation, because they fished all night.
1. Peter was resigning from his leadership role in the kingdom. He was resigning as an apostle to return to his former occupation in the fishing business. This was an occupation he was successful at before being called to apostolic leadership. Why did he resign? If he could not stay faithful to Jesus before a servant girl, how would he stay faithful for a lifetime?
 2. He wanted to find a "spiritual comfort zone" where he did not regularly face his failure and thus need to relate to Jesus only on the basis of receiving His undeserved mercy.
- C. Peter's heart was wounded by his failure in denying Jesus. He felt that he disappointed Jesus. Many cannot bear facing God with continual failure.
1. "To go fishing" in this context speaks of letting go of one's life vision to walk in the fullness of their relationship with Jesus and their calling in the kingdom.
 2. "To go fishing" was a statement of Peter's despair. He lost his confidence before God as one who genuinely loved God. Peter loved Jesus, but could not bear his spiritual failure.

IV. JESUS RESTORED PETER'S CONFIDENCE IN LOVE

- A. Jesus asked Peter the same question three times to break the shame of his three denials. The Lord had not retracted His calling on Peter's life to take care of the Lord's people. It is a very serious and important calling for the Lord to entrust the care of His people to one of His servants.

¹⁵Jesus said, "Simon...do you love Me more than these [the fish]?" He said to Him, "Yes, Lord; You know that I love You." He said to him, "Feed My lambs." ¹⁶He said to him again a second time, "Simon...do you love Me?" He said to Him, "Yes, Lord; You know that I love You." He said to him, "Tend My sheep." ¹⁷He said to him the third time, "Simon...do you love Me?" Peter was grieved because He said to him the third time, "Do you love Me?" And he said to Him, "Lord, You know all things; You know that I love You." (Jn. 21:15-17)

- B. Jesus is asking Peter, "Do you love me more than these"—more than the fish or the safety zone? Will you give yourself to Me even as a failure. Will you again set your heart to fully love Me?
- C. When God asks a question, it is not because He needs information. Jesus wanted Peter to discover information about his heart. Peter did not know where he stood with Jesus after his failure.
- D. In the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus told Peter that he had weak flesh, but a willing spirit. Peter did not believe that his flesh was weak. Now he struggled to believe that he *had a willing spirit*. Jesus sees our willing spirit more than we do. Knowledge of our sinful flesh is an important aspect of the truth about who we are, although *it is not the whole truth of who we are*.

⁴¹The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak. (Mt. 26:41)

- E. Jesus broke shame off Peter by making him say out loud, "I love God." Jesus was saying, "Peter, I see your love for Me." Peter was restored to confidence in his relationship with God and in his calling in the kingdom. The Lord already knew that Peter loved Him. But He wanted Peter to have confidence that his love for Jesus was genuine and that his calling had not be revoked.
- F. Jesus defined Peter by his willing spirit, not by his weak flesh. Our victory begins with our sincere intention to love and obey God. The Spirit is the source of our sincere desires (not the devil, nor our flesh). God defines our life in part by our sincere intentions to obey Him. Earlier, Peter defined his life by his weak flesh.
- G. The Lord wants us to have a *threefold confidence*. First, we are to be confident that He loves us in our weakness. Second, we are to be confident that He esteems our weak love for Him as genuine. Third, we are to be confident that He still entrusts us with the calling that He originally gave us. Five weeks later, Peter stood with boldness on the day of Pentecost because of this recovery.

²⁹For the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable. (Rom. 11:29)

V. QUESTIONS FOR SMALL-GROUP DISCUSSION (i.e., FCF FRIENDSHIP GROUPS)

1. Identify one point that inspired or challenged you. Why? What will you do differently to apply it?
2. Identify one point that you want to impart to a younger believer. Why? How will you approach this?
3. Identify one point that you would like to gain more understanding of. How will you seek to gain it?