

A Question of Love

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[0 : 00] Well, please turn in your Bibles to John chapter 21, the last chapter of John's Gospel, page 907. And as you do that, I bring greetings this morning from Antipas Baptist Church in Pretoria.

Last week we prayed for three of our women members who have been down taking a Bible conference in Pretoria. And they wanted you to know that the conference has been beyond all their possible hopes and prayers.

It's been a very effective conference. And this morning they went to church at the Antipas Baptist Church, which is a great name for a church. And it's an Afrikan church.

And because there were three Canadians there, they had the service in English. It was very kind of them. This week I'd be grateful for your prayers.

Bishop Felix Orgy, who used to work on staff here. In fact, most of the clergy that work on staff go somewhere else and become bishops and very important people.

[1 : 04] He is now in charge, and I stay here. I'm sorry about that. He's in charge of a group of Nigerian churches in North America called Kena.

And they're having their synod in El Paso, Texas. So it's like the beginning of a joke. An Australian minister who's working in Canada will be speaking to Nigerian churches in El Paso, Texas.

And I'm waiting for a punchline to come soon. John 21. Here we are. This is the last chapter of the gospel.

And it seems a bit strange, doesn't it? You know, it's a story of a failed fishing venture with failed disciples, a barbecue on the beach, and then a very painful conversation with Jesus.

It's just awkward. It's painful beginning to end, and it seems so ordinary. Lots of modern commentators think that John should have finished at the end of chapter 20.

[2 : 10] I mean, chapter 20 is such a big finish. He's raised from the dead. He's appeared to Mary, and he's appeared to the two groups of disciples. He's dealt with doubt and skepticism by appearing to Thomas, and he's promised the Holy Spirit's going to come.

And, you know, that movement from eyesight to ear hearing, you know, we read the witness's story and come to faith. And we even have a kind of conclusion at the end of the chapter in the last verse of 20, where John tells us why he's writing.

I've written these things so that you may believe Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name. It's a great way to finish a gospel, don't you? And they'd come to believe, and they'd come to be converted, the disciples.

Why do we need chapter 21? Well, apparently, conversion and receiving the life of Christ is not the end. One commentator says, it's never the end or even the beginning of the end.

It's the end of the beginning. It's the beginning of living with Jesus as the risen Lord. And as we look at it, I think you'll see that this last chapter of John is very like the first chapter, that the great heavenly and eternal realities of glory and grace somehow come into very ordinary, very fleshy circumstances in the person of Jesus.

[3 : 39] But it's different. Because Jesus' ministry has happened. His death has happened. He has risen from the dead. And more important, well, no, not so more importantly, but important for this chapter, the disciples have failed him miserably, all of them.

So how does the resurrection work now? And John sets us up perfectly in two halves of this chapter. In the first half, John shows us the power, the rule and reign of Jesus through a catch of fish.

And then in the second half, he shows us how Jesus uses that power to restore his disciples to him. And I think right from the start, we're told that something remarkable is going on.

This is not just another resurrection appearance. In verse 1, twice, and then in verse 14, we're told that Jesus is revealing himself. This is not just about showing his body.

There's rule and reign and restoration going on. And it's written beautifully and gently, I think. How does Jesus deal with failure?

[4 : 44] Failure at fishing, failure at following. I mean, we've just come out of chapter 20 where the single focus is this astonishing thing that our Lord has risen from the dead. But what does his resurrection mean for those of us who feel like from time to time we've abandoned Jesus or betrayed him?

Particularly the biggest, brassiest, boldest, leadingest disciple, Peter, whose failure was so public and it hasn't been dealt with yet. And the more I look at it, I think this chapter is a chapter for failures.

It's a chapter for people who feel they've failed Jesus. We're just saying, oh Jesus, I have promised. And I don't live up to my promises to Jesus.

And I've denied him in cowardly ways. And you might have done things, I've certainly done things I'm deeply ashamed of. And you feel as though you could never possibly be of any use to God again.

And that's a great way to avoid stepping up and serving others. So what does the resurrection mean to me and you today? And I think the two halves of the chapter tell us two things.

[5 : 54] One is, it means Jesus rules and reigns, verses 1 to 14. Now, the disciples are up in Galilee and we know that the angels told them to go there after they'd seen Jesus in Jerusalem.

And they're waiting for Jesus to appear and they're waiting for the Holy Spirit to come. And Simon Peter and six of the other disciples decide to go fishing. It's a perfectly natural thing to do.

And they're very experienced fishermen. And they're on the Lake of Galilee. The Sea of Tiberias is the same thing as the Lake of Galilee. They go out at the best time to catch fish, which is at night time. They're experts at this.

And they fish all night and catch nothing, which is a great picture of the church. Jesus allows us to labour at things without success sometimes because he wants to give us something better.

And if you just cast your eye down to verse 4, as at dawn, Jesus is standing on the beach. But none of them recognise him. They're not expecting him on the beach.

[7 : 02] They're not particularly after a night of failed fishing. So Jesus calls to them and says something like, lads, have you caught anything? And they say like all fishermen would.

No. There's probably a little more intonation in that. And Jesus then says, cast the net on the right side. And I quote, and you will find some.

So they put the net on the right. And now they have the opposite problem. It's so full of fish they don't know what to do. It's just, it's Jesus' perfect power again. He controls creation.

He still controls fish. And he knows the future. And I think this scene has echoes from the first scene of Jesus' public ministry when he called the disciples.

So I'll come back to that in a moment. John is the first one to recognise it's Jesus. And he says to Peter, it's Jesus. And it's so familiar to him because the first event in Jesus' public ministry with the disciples was on a day when they'd been out fishing all night and caught nothing.

[8 : 18] Remember this? The beginning of, it's in Luke 5. And Jesus instructs them to put down their nets again. And you remember Peter, Peter thinks Jesus is a good preacher but a lousy fisherman.

And he grudgingly says, no, right. And he puts the net down. And suddenly it's full of fish. And Peter falls down on his knees and he says, depart from me, I am a sinful man, O Lord.

And Jesus says, do not be afraid. From now on you'll be catching men. So they left everything and followed him. That's at the beginning of his ministry, his public ministry. And now at the end of his public ministry we have a miracle that is very similar but there's a massive difference.

Jesus has been with his disciples for years now. Now Peter and the others had come to believe that had the amazing privilege of sharing Jesus' ministry. They'd known what it was for Christ and the power of God to work through them as they preached to others and cast out demons.

But you remember on the night of Jesus' greatest suffering, they had all abandoned Jesus, including Peter who denied him three times. And everyone knew it, including Peter himself.

[9 : 29] So it's a very awkward moment. What's Peter going to do? Is he going to kneel down and say the same thing he did years ago? Not on your life.

Because I think you'd have to be very insensitive not to feel for Peter here. There's apprehension. He's convinced, I think, that he could never do anything public for Jesus again.

And yet as soon as he hears it's Jesus, he leaps over the side of the boat and swims to shore. I mean, the failed fishing trip was his idea. And there he is in the boat, grasping the net at the end, pulling in this large number of fish.

And I'm not going to make any comment on the 153. You can ask Dan about that later. And I think what is so thrilling for Peter is the simple fact that Jesus is working through him again.

He's got his hands on the net again. Is it possible he could use me? Because after failing Jesus, every single one of us, I think, feels like God can't really use us in any real way.

[10:38] Somehow we're condemned to a second-rate life, a second-rate Christian serving. And we tend to either go into a little corner or worse, I think.

I don't know if it's worse. We try to enact a sort of penance for ourselves to prove to God that we're really serious about this. Neither of those things work.

I can tell you they don't work. I've tried them both. This first half of the chapter is just beautiful. It's like lying in the summer looking up at the stars.

It sparkles and it flickers with light that reminds you of all sorts of things that are important. There are all sorts of details just spread around. I don't have time for lots of them.

I'll mention one, the charcoal fire. When they come to the beach, Jesus was already cooking fish and bread. Where did he get the fish from? I don't know. Dan will tell you. The word for charcoal fire is only used twice in the New Testament, both times in John.

[11:43] It's used here and it was used on the night when Jesus was suffering. He was in Caiaphas' house being tried, being beaten and abused.

And Peter is outside watching it, do you remember? And between the first time Peter denies Jesus and the second time that Peter denies Jesus, we're told he's warming himself by a charcoal fire. In other words, Jesus has to bring us back to the point of our failure before we move forward. So what does the resurrection mean?

It means that Jesus has all the power that he has before. He's the same Jesus. And as this little section finishes, Jesus is serving breakfast to his disciples.

He's still determined to serve his followers, even after their failure. And nothing is really said. It's very quiet.

[12:39] It's a very still moment. They're just having breakfast with Jesus, enjoying it. The ruling Lord with his failed people. It's beautiful, but it's very awkward. And the awkwardness becomes painful in the second half.

As the resurrection of Jesus, we see, doesn't just mean his rule and reign, but it means his restoration and his remaking of us. And the two things belong together.

Because if you ask, how does Jesus use his ruling power? The answer is to restore us. So in verse 15, right after breakfast, in front of all the other guys who are there, Jesus asks Peter three of the most piercing questions.

Simon, son of John, do you love me? Yes, Lord, you know that I love you. Simon, son of John, do you love me? Three times. And on the third time, Peter is grieved and he says, Lord, you know everything.

You know that I love you. Now, why is Jesus doing this? Of course, Peter's sin was very public, his threefold denial.

[13:50] And Jesus' restoration is also very public. And I think this is one of the most moving passages in all the New Testament, to watch how Jesus restores Peter in two ways.

He restores him personally and he restores him pastorally. He restores him personally. Because the key question is the first question where Jesus says, Peter, do you love me more than these? More than these other disciples? You remember when Jesus told them the night before he was betrayed that they would all fall away. Remember what Peter said?

He said, they may fall away. I will never fall away. You might all fall away, but I will never fall away. And Jesus said to him, before the night ends, before the cock crows, you'll deny me three times.

And Peter said, even if I have to die, I will not deny you. In Jesus, this is very interesting. Jesus asks the same question three times so that Peter can articulate his love three times.

[15:01] There's something very wonderful about this. Even though Peter has denied him, Jesus knows that Peter loves him. He knows that we love him even when we deny him and even when we

betray him and disobey him.

And he still accepts love for us. There's something very deep about this. And Jesus is not trying to humiliate Peter, but he's driving Peter back to this very big spiritual self-confidence that Peter has, where he thinks of himself as better than other people, more enlightened or more strong or more committed or more spiritually brave or something like that.

It's a complete lack of self-knowledge and every single one of us struggles with it. And there are times we feel so guilty and so ashamed of our sin, and it could be because we've done something grievous, we haven't done something or a period of backsliding, and the failure seems to us that we can't even face up to Jesus.

And part of the point of this is that with Christ, failure is not final. And the bitter lesson in self-confidence is being learned by Peter.

Because in answer to the first question, do you love me more than these others? Peter doesn't compare himself to the others. He just says very simply, Lord, you know that I love you. So what Jesus is doing is humbling Peter so that he can exalt him.

[16:30] Because there's no restoration without repentance. And there's no repentance without a recognition of failure. It's in opening our failure to him and being truthful and honest with his questions.

I think that's the point at which we learn to transfer our confidence from ourselves to him. Where we realise we should have no confidence in ourselves.

But it's not just personal, this restoration. It's pastoral. He remakes him for ministry. Because I think even when we're forgiven personally, it's more than possible to still think we're no good.

Of no use. I mean, imagine if Peter was personally forgiven and then he gets up on the day of Pentecost and begins to preach Christ. And people in the crowd will say, aren't you the guy who denied Jesus?

And if it's not dealt with, he's going to say, actually, yes, I need to stand down. But if it is dealt with, he can say, yes. And Jesus is still glorious.

[17:34] And this has always been Satan's aim. His aim is not just to get us into sin. He doesn't care really about sin so much to get us into it. What he wants to do is he wants to take us away from serving Christ.

He wants to stop us shining as lights in the world. He wants to focus on ourselves and our own disqualification rather than on serving Christ and serving others. This is very different than life in the city.

I mean, in Vancouver City, if you do something wrong publicly, you'll never be forgiven. If you're accused of doing something wrong, it'll never be forgotten. But that's not how it works with the risen Jesus.

For the three times Peter answers, you know I love you. What does Jesus do? He says, feed my sheep, tend my lambs, feed my sheep. It's a powerful and public recommissioning.

Because Jesus never leaves us at the point of forgiveness. He doesn't say to Peter, Peter, do you love me? Peter says, yes, Lord, you know that I love you.

[18:36] Okay, then. He says, feed my sheep. He specifically directs and commands Peter into his specific service. And while Peter's ministry may not be yours or my ministry, he directs each of us into some form of specific service.

And later on in this chapter, we don't have time to look at it. We can see that John's ministry and Peter's ministry are very different. But this is the thing for us, that any serving has to come out of a sense of our own forgiveness and his grace.

And that's a lovely thing because it means you don't have to be officially elected or appointed to serve in a congregation. You don't need the clergy to ask you to do anything.

It grows out of our love for Jesus as you seek the spiritual good of the people in your life. Because forgiveness is not just wiping the slate clean. Jesus comes and takes the initiative.

And then he moves us to useful ministry and service. This is what makes Christianity so different from religion. You know, religion says we do good so that we can be restored to God.

[19:52] Christianity says we're restored to God so that we can then do good. Religion says I show my love for God, then I'll be accepted. And Christ comes and says, no, you are accepted.

Now show love. And I don't think it's possible to really serve Jesus well or to serve him at all without understanding something of the depths of his mercy. And that comes out of a sense of his

forgiveness.

We love him because he first loved us. This is what Jesus wants. This is at the core of what Jesus is after in each of us. Not so much grand gestures or key spiritual performance indicators.

But the true living experience of loving him. It's why the key qualifications for Christian usefulness are not great gifts and influence.

They're not great and powerful experiences or positive energy. It's love for Jesus. It's the living proof that you've been restored to him personally. And it's true for every form of ministry in which we find ourselves.

[21 : 01] Particularly true for those who are supposed to be tending and feeding and shepherding the flock. Because in every ministry, unless it comes out of that sense of God's grace, we'll either be trying to please people or it's just going to become too hard.

And I think this is a wonderful word to us this morning, this last chapter of the Gospel of John. It's a great word for failures and it's a great word for the flock.

I mean, for failures, I mean, I think there's a sense in which all of us come Sunday by Sunday knowing we've failed him. And you may have failed Jesus catastrophically and feel the bitterness of your own failure.

You've done something, you've gone too far, or you've had a period of time and feel disqualified for service. And this passage, I think, is a passage of joy and hope for us.

Because since Jesus has been raised from the dead, his power is even greater. But he uses his power to restore us to himself and to serving.

[22 : 05] And he directs us to serve him out of love and to find ways of doing that. And all the glory and all the majesty and all the power and authority of God, he uses now to draw us closer to himself and to draw us closer to each other.

He comes to us and he confronts us with our failure. And he never confronts us with our failure without forgiveness in the same hand. And he calls us to be honest and to come to him.

And he tells us that our failure is not final. And he says to each of us today, do you love me? Do you love me? Yes, Lord, I know you. I know you know I love you. He will remake you and give you a share in ministry.

It's a great word for failures. And finally, it's a great word for us as a flock. Notice that Jesus chooses certain people, Peter here, to feed and tend his flock.

The flock is the church, God's people. And God places all his sheep in local groups, in churches. And he gives them pastors whose job is to tend the flock by feeding the flock.

[23 : 17] In other words, by teaching the word of God. To lead sheep into the green pastures of God's word. But if we're sheep, I think what's particularly encouraging is how precious the flock is to Jesus.

He says the sheep don't belong to Peter. He says, feed my sheep, tend my lambs, feed my lambs. The church never belongs to pastors or bishops.

The church belongs to Jesus Christ. He bought us with his blood. We hear his voice and follow him. That's why the job of the pastor is to lead us into his voice.

And not only that, but Jesus places himself inside the sheepfold. He identifies with the sheep. Just follow me for this little one, this last point.

You would expect Jesus to say, if you love my sheep, feed my sheep. But he says, if you love me, feed my sheep.

[24 : 24] We are so precious to him that our attitude to him will be our attitude to each other. If we love him, we will love each other. If we serve him, we will serve each other.

So brothers and sisters, humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, so that in due time he will exalt you. Cast all your cares and anxieties on him, because you know he cares for you.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Thank you.