

John 21:18

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Preacher: Rev Kenneth I Macleod

[0 : 00] Let us turn again for a little to the chapter we read in John's Gospel, John chapter 21. You could read it, verse 18. This is just after Jesus has questioned Peter regarding his love for him. Jesus then says, Truly, truly, I say to you, when you were young, you used to dress yourself and walk wherever you wanted. But when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and another will dress you and carry you where you did not want to go. This he said to show by what kind of death he was to glorify God. And after saying this, he said to him, Follow me.

I think this is one of the most beautiful chapters in the Bible. The scene on the shores of Galilee, it's a scene of hope. It's a scene of restoration. It's a scene of peace. It's a scene where we find things coming together, where brokenness is being repaired, where hopelessness is being turned in its head, and a glorious future is held out. And of course, this is all done by the Lord Jesus Christ. Peter, of course, features very largely in this particular chapter, and it is a chapter that deals with the public restoration of Peter. And Peter, of course, was somebody whose heart was broken at this time, because as we all know, Peter was the Persian who let down Jesus in spectacular style. He hadn't betrayed Jesus like Judas did, but he had denied Jesus. He had denied all knowledge of Jesus. He had denied all sympathy towards Jesus. And in fact, he denied Jesus ever meaning anything to him at all. And he did that with oaths, and he did it with curses, and he did it in the presence of Jesus. Because it was when Jesus was being tried, and Peter was there in the hall, and he was denying vehemently and almost violently any knowledge, any sympathy, any love to and for Jesus. And it's really quite extraordinary, because just very shortly before that, Peter was saying to Jesus, you are the one person, I am the one person you can really count on. Because Jesus had been telling what was going to happen, and he actually told the disciples of how they were going to forsake him.

And Peter said, no. He said, all others might forsake you, but I won't. He actually said to Jesus, Jesus, I am ready to go to prison for you, and I am ready to die for you. And I believe that when Peter said that, he actually meant it. Peter wasn't bluffing. Peter wasn't just giving words out cheaply, because Peter really loved the Lord Jesus Christ. The three years that Peter followed Jesus, it's so evident that he loved Jesus passionately. But there was so much of self, there was so much still to be broken in Peter. And Peter had hard lessons to learn, and Peter needed to be humbled. And so the Peter that we find on the shores of Galilee is a Peter who has gone through a major crisis, and a Peter whose confidence has been absolutely shattered. And when Peter is, now Peter had already, the disciples had already seen the Lord Jesus. He had revealed himself to them prior to this. And we've got to remember that although Jesus revealed himself to many people after the resurrection, he never revealed himself to any, but to those who were his followers. The only one exception was to Saul of Tarshish. Jesus revealed himself from heaven to Saul of Tarshish. And of course, that was in order to convert, to turn Saul to himself, to lay hold upon Saul. But although Jesus had many, many people saw the risen Christ, the only people who saw him were those who loved him, those who were followers of him. Those who didn't accept

[5 : 05] Christ, those who had rejected Christ, none of them saw the risen Christ. It was only those who were his followers. And so we find Peter at this particular time, he says, we read about that, that in verse 3, Peter said to them, I am going fishing. They said to him, we will go with you. They went out and got into the boat, but that night they caught nothing. And when Peter says there, I'm going fishing, many commentators suggest that the language actually indicates that I am returning to the fishing. It wasn't simply, I'm going fishing tonight, but I'm going back to the fishing. And the reason, no doubt, that Peter is speaking like that is that he feels because of what he did to Jesus publicly, because of his denial in a public arena with the oaths and the curses, he no doubt felt that he had lost everything that had been given. He felt that he could no longer be a spokesman for

Jesus Christ. He felt that his office was in tatters. And he felt that there was no future for him as somebody who was at the forefront of Jesus' movement regarding the kingdom of God. And so there's this brokenness in Peter, and he's saying,

I'm going fishing. And whether it is a one-off or whether it is, as has been suggested, going back to the fishing, we find the disciples, some of the, a few of the disciples go out with him. And it was a poor night. They caught nothing. And you know, in a sense, that was symbolic of the way things were.

And I would imagine that Peter coming back that night, I cannot imagine how low he felt. Because here he is on the one hand, and he's saying, I'm going to have to go back fishing. It's the only thing I know about. I was a fisherman before I was called by Jesus. I don't know any other trade.

There's nothing else I can do. I've lost it as far as working for Jesus is concerned. So I'm going back fishing. But after spending the whole night fishing out on the waters that he knew like the back of his hand, he's coming back with an empty boat. And no doubt he's saying to himself, I can't even do that now. The one thing that I thought I could do as a fisherman, and I knew the tides, and I knew the way the waters run, and I knew the winds, and I knew the spots where the fish went.

I can't even fish now. And so Peter has an empty boat and an empty heart. And if any person felt broken and useless at this particular moment, it must have been this man, Peter. But you know, one of the wonderful things about the Christian faith is that it's full of new beginnings.

[8 : 14] And what I mean by that, obviously, is I don't mean that a person becomes a Christian and stops being a Christian and becomes a Christian again. Not at all. Once a person is united to Jesus Christ by faith, that union is forever. No man shall pluck them out of my hand, is what Jesus says.

But we also know that the walk, the Christian walk, can be difficult, and there can be slips, and there can be falls, and there can be stumblings. And this is one of the wonderful things, is that Jesus is in the business of restoring. Psalm 23, we mentioned that very recently.

There is almost something about Psalm 23 of being a heavenly psalm, that the shepherding, this is what Jesus does. Remember how it goes, Jesus is in the business of restoring souls. And maybe there's somebody here tonight, or maybe there's a lot of people here tonight.

And that's what you're, in your heart, you say, I wish, I really wish my soul was restored. I remember days when it was just, there was a thrill. The Word was thrilling. Coming to church was thrilling.

Fellowship was thrilling. It's not like that now. I've kind of lost my way. Well, you pray the psalm in Psalm 23, and say, Lord, restore my soul. You did it for David. You've done it for so many people.

[9 : 55] You did it for Peter. Do it for me as well. Restore my soul. Well, this is what, one of the wonderful things, and this is what Jesus was doing for Peter. He was restoring him to office. And almost in a sense, there's something almost again symbolic in Peter catching nothing, because there's an, as far as we can see, this emptiness in Peter's life. And you know, with, in a sense, that's how life is. If we don't have the Lord, there is an incredible emptiness. And it doesn't really matter what you do or achieve, or what you strive for and get in life. While all these things can be important and wonderful, if we don't have Christ at the end of the day, it's empty.

And I wish that those who maybe have not come to faith in Jesus Christ could absolutely understand just how empty life is without Jesus. It's empty. And if you haven't discovered, and I pray that you will, that you will discover in time how empty life is, because an empty life lived, if you die like that, the emptiness of eternity is indescribable. Anyway, Jesus appears from the shore after his resurrection. And so he's appearing to the disciples. And we read of how he asked them then, he said, right, go and cast your net out on the other side of the boat. And they did that. And there was this amazing catch. They had an amazing catch. And then Jesus gives that invitation to them when they got on to land. And he said to them, come and have breakfast. Jesus said to them in verse 12, come and have breakfast. Translated elsewhere, come and eat. And sometimes come and dine. Come and eat.

And that's the great invitation that Jesus is giving in the gospel. He's giving that invitation tonight. Come and eat. He is, remember, the bread of life. He is the food for our souls. And Jesus is saying to you tonight, come and feed on me. Nobody else, nothing else can nourish your soul. Lots of things can satisfy your body.

There are things that can stimulate and satisfy your mind. But nothing can satisfy your soul but Jesus Christ alone. This is the word. This is, as we were remembering this morning, the importance of bringing the word to the sacrament. Jesus is the word. And he is the one we need for our life, for our soul.

And Jesus is saying tonight, come and eat. Come on and eat. Feed on me. And so, we find that the disciples, of course, come and must have been an amazing moment for them. And then Jesus turns to Peter and he begins to question him. And he's saying to him, Peter, do you love me?

[12:59] And again, linguists will tell us that Jesus is using here the highest form of love. And Peter cannot reach up to that high point. And at the end of the day, as Jesus presses home three times, he asks Jesus, do you love me? Peter has to turn to the omniscience, the all-knowing Jesus and say to him, Lord, you know everything. You know that I love you. And, you know, it's very interesting what has happened because Jesus asked Peter, Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these? Do you love me? I believe he's saying, do you love me, Peter, more than the other disciples? The old Peter would have said, yes, Lord, I'm number one. The old Peter said, I'm ready to go to prison and I'm ready to die for you. Here's the new Peter. The Peter has been broken and humbled. And he would never say, Lord,

I love you more than anybody else. He has to say, Lord, you know all things. You know that I love you. There's a brokenness in Peter because the self-confidence, the self-righteousness maybe of Peter and the self-satisfaction. But, of course, we know that Jesus has a great purpose and a great future for Peter. But he has to establish from Peter his love. And love is at the very heart of service. You know, we can have zeal. We can say all the right things and do all the right things and appear to be right. And we can have a great sense of energy and zeal and all these things.

But, you know, if we don't have love, we've got nothing. That's what the Word is telling us.

Supposing I give my body to be burned and have not charity. Go to 1 Corinthians 13 and read that amazing chapter on love. And so, in order to serve, Jesus has to establish that Peter is somebody who is motivated and driven by love for Jesus. And so, then, after that, he then, in verse 18, he turns again, he says to Peter, and he says, Truly, I say to you, when you were young, you used to dress yourself and walk wherever you wanted and such like. And really, what Jesus is saying there is, Peter, when you were a young man, you were a free spirit. You did what you wanted. But, you know, I'm going to tell you something,

Peter. When you get old, something's going to happen to you. Others are going to take you. This is what it tells us in verse 18. But when you're old, you will stretch out your hands, and another will dress you and carry you where you do not want to go. And it tells us here, this he said to show by what kind of death he was to glorify God. He's talking about Peter's death. And again, virtually everybody's agreed that Jesus is here talking to Peter and telling him, Peter, you're going to get the martyr's crown. You are going to be taken. And the stretching out of the hands would indicate that it's by crucifixion. Most people are agreed upon that, that Peter was going to have the martyr's crown and was going to die in a similar way, well, at least physically, to the Lord. And it's very interesting that the man who said to Jesus, Lord, I'm ready to die for you, is actually going to die for Jesus. The time he said it, he was not ready to. But when the time comes, he will be ready.

And you know, when Jesus makes this statement about he's looking into the future, there are two or three things just really that we could say here. And the first is that when we see here that Jesus tells Peter that it's when you are old, you're going to die. And it's very interesting that very shortly after this, at the very beginning, the dawn of the early church, that remember how James was arrested and put to death? And then Peter was arrested, and he was to be executed. And the very night before his execution, we read about it in Acts chapter 12, we have Peter languishing in the jail, tied, chained to the prison warders. And you know, it's quite an amazing thing how it has been said that a knife is taken to the promises of God. And here was Jesus telling Peter, Peter, it's when you're an old man, you're going to die. And very shortly after that, Peter is going to be executed. And I believe that one of the reasons why Peter, the night before his execution, was sleeping like a baby, when the angel came into the prison, he had to shake Peter awake. Peter was asleep.

[18:19] And I believe that Peter was resting his head and his heart and his life on the promise of Jesus. Because he would be thinking back, it wasn't long. He would never forget these moments on the shores of Galilee. And Jesus speaking to him, and Jesus saying, you know, Peter, when you're an old man, and Peter saying, well, I'm not an old man. I believe the word of my Lord, even although the situation looks impossible. And I'm chained here, and they've killed James, and tomorrow is the day of my execution. I don't believe it will take place. I believe that Peter was resting. That's why he slept like a baby. And he, as we said, had to be wakened by the angel. And of course, he was, the angel took him out and set him free. So we see here that the word of God is always true, even although it may be tested. And it will be tested. That's how our faith grows.

Second thing we see here is the foreknowledge of Jesus Christ. Jesus knows everything. And let us thank the Lord that he and his mercy has hidden many things or most things from us. If we knew the future, if we knew everything that was to take place in our lives, can you imagine how distressing and how awful it would be if one of the things that was given us was an insight into how our life was to unfold? And at all the dates and all the events and all the traumas, yes, the good things, but also the bad things, that we were to know all these things before they happened. It would unhinge our mind. We couldn't cope in life.

But God in his mercy has hidden these things from us. But how thankful we are that the Lord knows everything is known to him. And then the third thing that we see here is that Peter's death, now we were looking at this very recently when we were looking at Lazarus, when Lazarus died at the meeting two or three weeks ago, and Jesus' words to Mary saying, to Martha, did I not say to you that if you believed you would see the glory of God? And we see that there's glory attached to death.

This he said, it says in verse 19, this he said to show by what kind of death he was to glorify God. You see, the Lord Jesus allowed Lazarus to die because through Lazarus' death and subsequent resurrection, God was to be glorified. And God is glorified in our life, and he's glorified in our death. You know, that should be our prayer, my friends. Lord, help me to live in a way that will bring glory to your name. And help me to die in a way that will bring glory to your name.

And indeed, we should also be praying, Lord, give me the grace to live in a way that is God-glorifying. And give me the grace when the time comes, the grace to die in a God-glorifying way.

And you know, there are many people in their dying days that have been an amazing witness to the Lord. You know, it's quite an extraordinary thing to see people dying full of faith.

[22 : 00] It's not just courage. Yes, there's courage. But there's more than courage. There's an awareness of where they're going. They are, it's like as the psalm says, in I will fear no evil, even in death's dark veil, I will fear no evil. It's a wonderful thing. And tonight, if you have Jesus Christ, that is something you can look forward to as you enter into death's dark veil. Tonight, death may hold a kind of fear for you, even although you're a believer. Well, you ask the Lord that when that time comes, and it's only when the time comes, that you will be given a deliverance from fear, and that you will enter into death's dark veil with the Lord holding your hand, aware of it. And so it's a wonderful prospect that the believer has. And so we must seek to glorify God in our life as well as in our death. And then Jesus turns to

Peter, and he says, after saying all this, follow me. Follow me, Peter. And this word, follow, this word where Jesus says, follow me, it would indicate more than just to be a companion and somebody who's coming after me. The very word expresses the idea of union and likeness. In other words, Peter, I want you as you follow me to become more and more like me, so that there's a growing identity with me, so that you are becoming day by day more like me. And that's what true discipleship involves, a growing Christ-likeness. And if we follow Jesus, it will happen. And the closer we follow Jesus, the more like him we will become. And it was very evident that that was what was happening in the life of Peter and the life of John. Now, this was the third time that Jesus had called Peter.

And the first call, of course, came through, it really came through Andrew, Peter's brother. Remember how Andrew and John had begun to follow Jesus after John the Baptist had said, behold the Lamb of God that taketh away the sin of the world. And they spent the whole day with Jesus. And what did Andrew do?

Well, Andrew went straight home and he told his brother, we found the Messiah. And Andrew brought his brother to Jesus. And I think Andrew was one of the great men of the Bible. We don't read an awful lot that Andrew did. But there's no doubt whatever that Andrew was the kind of person who had a great ability of getting alongside people. And I believe that Andrew was a beautiful Christian. And do you know the reason why I think that? Is that his brother was ready to listen to him. Do you know the hardest place to witness? Is that home? Amongst those who know you best. They know, they see maybe the sides that other people don't see about you. And they're probably less likely to listen to you at home than they are to listen to other people. But here's Andrew, and he goes home, and Peter's ready to listen to him. So I tend to think that Andrew was one of these lovely Christians. And he takes

Peter to Jesus. And that, of course, you can read about that in John's Gospel in the first chapter. And, of course, what an amazing thing. Maybe, Andrew, at the end of the day, if you were to assess the different ministries, and you look at Peter's ministry, and you say, how many were converted under Peter's ministry? You'd say, oh, thousands. Remember at Pentecost, there were thousands and thousands converted as Peter preached. How many were converted under Andrew? Well, not very sure, but he was instrumental in bringing Peter to Jesus. You see the link in the chain? And, you know, the Lord has, that's all we are at the end of the day. It's not about assessing things for ourselves. We're all just part of a link in the chain. And God's using all of us in different ways. And it's amazing when you hear people speak and tell about the way the Lord works. There are loads of, sometimes we're aware of them, sometimes even we're not. But the influences of people, the words of people, and, you know, the prayers of people, that's one of the, that's part of the secret work that we don't know anything about.

[26 : 45] Maybe you're here today and you're a believer. And part of that preparation and part of the work that went on is the prayer of somebody that you have no idea was ever praying for you. Might even be somebody that you didn't particularly like. And that person prayed for you every single day and every single night. You don't know it. You didn't know it. You still don't know. Only the great glory will reveal these things. But we're all just part of a chain, God's chain, working for him. We've to, we've to be faithful where God has set us. And you see, that's the thing about Peter. To begin with, we, when a person comes to faith in Jesus Christ, it doesn't mean that we automatically go into full-time service for the Lord. Peter got a second call. That was to leave his fishing and to become a fisher of men. So when a person becomes a Christian, it doesn't mean that they are automatically to leave wherever they are and to go into full-time service for the Lord. We are to work where the Lord has us and to stay there until the Lord will reveal otherwise. And that was the second call for Peter.

But here's the third call for Peter to follow him. Third time Jesus has said to follow. Not everybody, as we said, will receive a second call to follow Jesus into full-time work. And not everybody who has gone into full-time work will receive a third call like Peter did. Because maybe, I would imagine that most people in full-time work do not collapse the way Peter did. But Peter certainly did. But here he is, he is being restored wonderfully into the Lord's, to the Lord's service.

And so Jesus tonight is saying to us as well, follow me. That's a great call that goes out. Follow me by living a life that is consistent with my name. You know, when we've become Christians and we begin to follow Jesus, we are saying we are following Jesus. It's almost like we're taking his name upon our shells. And you know, that's an amazing thought. And it sort of puts pressure on us that we are to live in a way that is consistent with the name of Jesus. We are to seek to live lives of obedience to his word. So Jesus is saying, follow me. And could I urge anybody in here tonight who has never yet begun to follow Jesus? It's high time you did. Because Jesus, Jesus has one route through this world to heaven. There is no other way to get to heaven but by following Jesus. We can try this, that, and the next thing. But unless we follow Jesus by accepting him and traveling with him, we will not get to heaven. Jesus said that, I am the way, the truth, and the life. No man cometh unto the Father but by me. No other way.

So, can I ask you, do you want to go to heaven? I don't think there's anybody in here tonight who would say, no, I don't. I'm sure there are many people, if you did a survey around our country and they've got no thoughts about it or no idea about it as such. But I believe those sitting under the gospel tonight say, yes, I do. Well, here is the way. It is in and through Jesus. Now, there are many other things that we could say, but I'll just say one last thing. And that is where we find that Peter being Peter, I always think that Peter is one of these people who had had a very short concentration span. And to a certain extent, I can maybe identify with that.

[31 : 14] I'm very easily distracted. Some people, they're so focused. And others, it's very easy for them to be distracted. Well, I think Peter was in that category. Easily distracted. And Jesus is having this heart to heart with Peter. Do you love me? Do you love me? Do you love me? Peter, let me tell me your future. When you're an old man, you're going to die. Follow me. It's very powerful. It's intimate. And as Jesus is speaking to Peter, then Peter's notice is John. Oh, what about him, Lord?

What about him? You can see straight away, here's this Peter, you know, just a concentration and so easily distracted. And Jesus, Jesus says basically to Peter, Peter turned and saw the disciple whom Jesus loved following, the one who had been reclining at the, when Peter saw him, he said to

Jesus, Lord, what about this man? Jesus said to him, if it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you? You follow me. Now, Jesus is not preaching here selfishness or self-centeredness. But with regard to following him, there has to be focus. Never, that's not your business, Peter. Peter. I'm dealing with you. I will deal with John as well. You listen to what I am saying. And I think this is so important because sometimes we are bad for doing that. Maybe tonight you are hearing the words, follow me. And like Peter, straight away your attention has been pulled to somebody you know. And you say, oh, follow me. I know some Christians.

They call themselves Christians. Well, if that's Christianity, do you know what Jesus is saying to you? What is that to you? You follow me. Or maybe it's the very opposite. And tonight you're being challenged by the gospel, follow me. And then you're saying, oh, when I look at, when I look at what many Christians have to do and what it means to be a Christian and the sort of kind of sacrifices that have to be made. And I look at this person's life and I look at that person's life and I think, oh my, Jesus is saying to you again, well, what's that to you?

[33 : 52] You follow me. This is between me and you. It's personal. That's what Jesus is saying tonight. Let's pray. Lord, our God, we pray that we may indeed hear the words of Jesus and respond, that we will not turn away from them, but that we will take them to heart. Life is short. May we use the time wisely and lay hold upon a great Savior. Lord, have mercy upon us and forgive us when our life is not consistent in the way it should be. Forgive us when we stumble and tumble, but help us, Lord, to walk more firmly and that our feet will follow the feet of Jesus. Bless us then and do us good. Have mercy upon us. Bless the fellowship that follows on after for giving us our sin in Jesus' name. Amen.