

Transformed Characters **A Turning Point for Peter – “You Know That I Love You”** **John 21**

This narrative takes place after Christ’s resurrection. It is the third and final appearance of Jesus featured in the Gospel of John. The first two appearances were chronicled in John 20. The week-long Feast of the Unleavened Bread was already over and the disciples have left Jerusalem and returned to Galilee.

Jesus’ Appearance at the Sea of Galilee

For the disciples and for Peter in particular, it had been a very eventful and emotional week. Since the time in the Upper Room with the washing of the disciples’ feet, Peter had witnessed the betrayal and arrest of Jesus, cut off the ear of the high priest’s servant, denied Jesus not once but three times, saw Jesus crucified, died and buried. This was the lowest point in Peter’s life. But then his sadness was turned to joy when Jesus resurrected and appeared to him and the other disciples. Hope and joy replaced hopelessness and sadness. Purposefulness and faith once again undergirded their lives. And now they were at the Sea of Tiberias or the Sea of Galilee (see John 6:1) to meet Jesus as instructed (Matt 26:32, 28:7-10; Mark 16:7).

But while waiting, Peter in his characteristic impulsiveness, and perhaps like one who simply cannot sit around and do nothing, declared “I am going fishing.” His initiative was followed by six other disciples who went into the fishing boat with him. They fished all night but caught nothing. Are we sometimes too impatient to wait for God’s direction that we go ahead and do things according to our own strength and wisdom? What is the result of doing things or carrying out plans without God (John 15:5)?

Early in the morning, Peter and his friends, by now tired and hungry, were addressed by a stranger from the shore. This lack of recognition may be because the resurrected body of Jesus was transcendent and the distance of the boat from the shore made it difficult for the disciples to see Jesus clearly. After ascertaining that they did not have any fish, Jesus then instructed the disciples to “cast the net on the right side of the boat.” Why the disciples followed the instructions of a stranger is not explained but they did so and a miracle happened. They caught such a large number of fish that they could not haul in the net.

This miracle must have sparked a sudden light of recognition in “the disciple whom Jesus loved.” This disciple then exclaimed, “It is the Lord!” With this revelation, Peter, ever the impetuous man of action, “put on his outer garment... and threw himself into the sea.” He swam straight to shore without even thinking about the boat, the net and the fish. Just as he had left everything when Jesus first called him, Peter was ready to leave everything again to be with Jesus. We may fault Peter for his hastiness, and some may even say he was irresponsible since he simply left the care of the boat, the net and the fish to the others. But are we as willing to forgo our earthly riches and security to follow Jesus when He calls?

The other disciples went back to shore in the boat dragging the net full of fish. When they got out on land, a charcoal fire with a fish laid out on it and bread greeted them. Jesus then asked them to bring to Him some of the fish they had just caught. Peter responded by climbing aboard the boat and, likely with the help of the other disciples, dragged the net ashore. To emphasise that this catch of fish was an intervention of God and to show the great sensation of encountering the risen Jesus, the author pointed out that there were 153 large fish in the net, and though it was very heavy, the net miraculously did not tear. The disciples were then invited to have breakfast with the Lord Jesus serving them. Jesus who exemplified the lesson on servanthood in the Upper Room continued with this lesson on the shore of the Sea of Galilee. It is relatively easier to be a servant when we are at the bottom of a hierarchy, spiritual or secular, but does our attitude towards servanthood change as we are promoted up the hierarchy?

Peter's Turning Point

After breakfast Jesus began a conversation with Peter that was the turning point for him. This was the moment when Jesus reinstated and commissioned Peter for service. On the night when Jesus was arrested, Peter had publicly denied Jesus three times. Now in the presence of the other disciples, Jesus presented Peter with an opportunity to make amends and affirm his love and loyalty by asking Peter three personal questions that centred on Peter's love for Him. In the exchange that took place, Jesus first asked if Peter's love for Him is more than that of the other disciples. Peter had earlier boasted of his love for Jesus to the extent of being willing to lay down his life for Him (John 13:37). He had claimed his faithfulness to Jesus is even greater than the other disciples, and in contrast to the others, he even declared he will never fall away (Matt 26:33).

Although Peter had answered, "Yes Lord, you know that I love You," Jesus asked Peter again if he loved Him. And again Peter answered, "Yes Lord, you know that I love You." Following each answer from Peter, Jesus responded by commissioning him as His under-shepherd to "feed My lambs" and "tend My sheep." But for the third time Jesus again asked Peter, "Do you love Me?" This third question broke Peter's heart as the realisation hit him that he simply could not follow Jesus in his own strength. Relying on his own power of will to affirm his loyalty was futile for Peter realised he needed Jesus' enablement. Peter confessed, "Lord, You know everything..." With this admission Jesus completed Peter's restoration and sealed Peter's commission as shepherd of Jesus' flock by saying, "Feed my sheep."

Peter, having accepted his commission, was immediately confronted with its cost as Jesus prophetically prepared him for what his future holds. He would serve into his old age and in the end die with hands outstretched, a euphemism for crucifixion. According to Clement of Rome (ca. A.D. 96), Peter had suffered martyrdom in the later years of Nero's reign (ca. A.D. 64-66), and Tertullian (ca. A.D. 212) also claimed that Peter was crucified. With this pronouncement, Jesus then gave Peter the command to "Follow Me."

There is a cost involved in following Jesus. This path of discipleship entails the way of the cross and Jesus made clear what is involved – "Whoever hates his life in this world (i.e. thinks so little of his life, and so much of God, that he is willing to sacrifice it all for God) will keep it for eternal life. If anyone serves Me, he must follow Me" (John 12:25-26). Unlike Peter, most of us are not called to martyrdom but we are nonetheless called to die to self-will, taking up our cross daily and to follow Him (Luke 9:23).

Are you carrying your cross daily? Bruce Milne explains,

"Death for Christ is the door to living with Christ. As with Jesus, crucifixion leads to resurrection, death to life. Peter, and we with him, by dying bring glory to God."

Keep Your Eyes on Jesus

As Peter and Jesus were walking and talking, Peter must have heard someone behind them. He turned and saw "the disciple whom Jesus loved" (i.e. John) following them. Peter then asked Jesus about John's future. Jesus rebuked Peter, essentially telling him to mind his own business. Peter's responsibility was to follow Jesus, not meddle in the lives of other believers.

Sometimes in our walk with the Lord and in our service to Him, we do get distracted. We begin to look at other believers with questions about their life and ministry. Unless it is our responsibility to look into these areas of other believers' lives, the Lord's admonition to us is "mind your own business." We are to be responsible for what God has entrusted to us and not kay-poh (meddle) in the lives of other believers. God has His plans for us; He also has His plans for our fellow brethren in Christ. It is God's business how He wants to work in their lives. Our business is to keep our eyes on Jesus and follow Him. Where are your eyes cast?

Peter in his final encounter with the resurrected Jesus was confronted with an aspect of his life which is both his strength and weakness. He was a leader full of initiative and passion but he was also impulsive, self-reliant, proud, ambitious and a coward. But in spite of his many flaws, his greatest saving grace was that he undoubtedly loves Jesus. So when Jesus exposed the area in his life that need changing and transforming, Peter, though initially defensive, gave in and admitted he needed Jesus' help. That was the turning point in his life that allowed the process of transformation to take place. As Warren Wiersbe points out,

"Jesus is transforming lives today. Wherever He finds a believer who is willing to yield to His will, listen to His Word, and follow His way, He begins to transform that believer and accomplish remarkable things in that life. He also begins to do wonderful things through that life."

Is God speaking to you about surrendering your life to Him or pointing out an area in your life that needs to be surrendered to Him for His transforming work? Your love for Him will facilitate your submission and when this happens, it will also be the turning point in your life for transformation to take place.

Source:

ESV Study Bible (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008)

Andreas J. Kostenberger, *John: Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2004).

Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Transformed* (Colorado Springs, CO: Chariot Victor Pub, 1986).

Questions for Cell Discussion

Question 1

From verses 1-3, what can you observe about what Peter and some of the disciples did when they were at the Sea of Tiberias? Why do you think they did what they did?

Question 2

The disciples had caught nothing despite fishing all night, and yet they obeyed the instructions of a stranger from the shore to cast their nets on the right side of the boat. What happened when they obeyed?

Can you recall another occasion when a similar episode was highlighted in the Gospels? What is your interpretation of why this event was re-enacted by Jesus here (vv. 4-7)?

Question 3

From your observation of Jesus' dialogue with Peter in verses 15-17:

- What were His questions to Peter centred on?
- Why do you think Jesus focused on this issue?
- What does this issue have to do with being restored to the service of Christ?
- Why does Jesus have to ask Peter the same question three times?

Question 4

Take some time to reflect on the questions that Jesus had posed to Peter and think about how they can be applied to your own life.

- How much do you love Jesus?
- Is your love for Him strong enough to motivate you to surrender to Him those areas in your life which the Holy Spirit has been speaking to you about?
- Share this with your group and ask them to pray with and for you, that you may yield them to God in order that He can do a transforming work in you.