

Forgiven & Fearless

by Mark Jarvinen

Epilogue: Jesus Appears to Seven Disciples

Later, Jesus appeared again to the disciples beside the Sea of Galilee. This is how it happened. ² Several of the disciples were there—Simon Peter, Thomas (nicknamed the Twin), Nathanael from Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two other disciples.

³ *Simon Peter said, “I’m going fishing.”*

“We’ll come, too,” they all said. So they went out in the boat, but they caught nothing all night.

⁴ *At dawn Jesus was standing on the beach, but the disciples couldn’t see who he was. ⁵ He called out, “Fellows, have you caught any fish?” “No,” they replied.*

⁶ *Then he said, “Throw out your net on the right-hand side of the boat, and you’ll get some!” So they did, and they couldn’t haul in the net because there were so many fish in it.*

⁷ *Then the disciple Jesus loved said to Peter, “It’s the Lord!” When Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he put on his tunic (for he had stripped for work), jumped into the water, and headed to shore. ⁸ The others stayed with the boat and pulled the loaded net to the shore, for they were only about a hundred yards from shore. ⁹ When they got there, they found breakfast waiting for them—fish cooking over a charcoal fire, and some bread.*

¹⁰ *“Bring some of the fish you’ve just caught,” Jesus said. ¹¹ So Simon Peter went aboard and dragged the net to the shore. There were 153 large fish, and yet the net hadn’t torn.*

¹² *“Now come and have some breakfast!” Jesus said. None of the disciples dared to ask him, “Who are you?” They knew it was the Lord.*

¹³ *Then Jesus served them the bread and the fish. ¹⁴ This was the third time Jesus had appeared to his disciples since he had been raised from the dead.*

¹⁵ *After breakfast Jesus asked Simon Peter, “Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?”*

“Yes, Lord,” Peter replied, “you know I love you.”

“Then feed my lambs,” Jesus told him.

¹⁶ *Jesus repeated the question: “Simon son of John, do you love me?”*

“Yes, Lord,” Peter said, “you know I love you.”

“Then take care of my sheep,” Jesus said.

¹⁷ *A third time he asked him, “Simon son of John, do you love me?”*

*Peter was hurt that Jesus asked the question a third time. He said, "Lord, you know everything. You know that I love you." Jesus said, "Then feed my sheep (**John 21:1-17 NLT**).*

On April 9, 1945 **Dietrich Bonhoeffer** was executed at a concentration camp in Flossenber, Germany, a mere 23 days before the end of World War II. He was a brilliant young man from a famous German family who seemed constantly to choose the more difficult path when an easier one was available. Rather than be confined solely to the academic world, Bonhoeffer chose to pastor a congregation; instead of remaining in the freedom and safety of the United States, the young pastor/scholar returned to Hitler's Germany to take his stand against tyranny in his homeland. Bonhoeffer was a pacifist who plotted to assassinate a tyrant, and a polite, refined intellectual who passionately waged war with fascism by writing from a prison cell. Bonhoeffer was a fearless and deeply committed disciple, yet it wasn't human bravery that fueled his walk with Christ. It was Christ's love for him. In his book, **The Cost of Discipleship**, he wrote,

"As a Christian I am called to treat my enemy as a brother and to meet hostility with love. My behavior is thus determined not by the way others treat me, but by the treatment I receive from Jesus through his forgiving love."

Thus, we see in the life of Bonhoeffer that it is the Christian, whose focus is on Jesus and his forgiving love, who is empowered to love others and heed his call to **"Come, and die."** We often marvel at Bonhoeffer's fearless obedience to Christ, perhaps forgetting that what made it possible was his awareness of Christ's forgiving love for him.

Today's text features another disciple who became a fearless follower of Christ when he encountered his forgiving love. I'm speaking of Peter (more on him later). As a whole, this text is so down to earth

and familiar that its impact can easily become lost on us. The story seems innocent enough - seven of Jesus' disciples out in a fishing boat, unable to catch anything. Jesus comes along and saves the day, and the disciples are renewed in their calling to follow him. But there's much more to this story than meets the eye. The impact has to do with the **timing** of this incident within John's Gospel account. Remember, Jesus had already risen from the dead, winning the victory over sin as recorded in **(John 20:1-18)**. Furthermore, in chapter 20, Jesus had visited his disciples and breathed his Holy Spirit on them, commissioning them to go out into the world and forgive sins **(John 20:19-31)**. That leads us into today's text in John 21. **Would we expect to find the disciples fishing after such climactic events?**

RETREATING TO OUR COMFORT ZONES

The text doesn't tell us why Peter and the others went fishing that night. But remember that several of the disciples, including Peter, had been professional fishermen prior to following Jesus. For that reason perhaps it's not so surprising to find them fishing again. After all, the events of the recent past had been mind-boggling. Jesus, their hero for the past three years, the teacher and miracle worker who had turned their world upside down, had died an unspeakable death, but now was miraculously alive. On a purely human level, who could blame them for wanting to restore some normality to their lives once again? Returning to the familiar life they had known as fishermen probably had a therapeutic effect. When things spin unpredictably out of control, as they did for the disciples after Jesus' death and resurrection, it's natural for us to go back to what we know, to the things that are **comfortable, predictable, and familiar**. Peter and the others needed time to clear their heads and sort out their emotions in

the aftermath of Jesus' death and resurrection. It's **normal, natural,** and even **necessary** to return to the familiar when trauma or turmoil rocks our world. But having said this, **it's tempting to stay too long in our comfort zones!** Notice that while fishing all night, they hadn't caught any fish. That's precisely why we find Jesus on the scene, renewing His call on their lives – **"Friends, haven't you any fish?"**

JESUS RENEWS HIS CALL

Someone once wisely stated, **"The most tiring exercise in the world is to carry yesterday on your back."** Each one of the disciples had doubted Jesus' words concerning his resurrection. Each one had given up hope after Jesus' cruel death on the cross. But no one was more aware of his failure than Peter, who had personally denied his Master three times on the night Jesus was arrested. Peter, the courageous one, who had earlier boldly declared, **"Jesus, I'll follow you anywhere!"** had fallen flat on his face when it mattered the most.

In some sense, each of the disciples had dropped the ball under pressure and as a result could have carried yesterday on their backs for a long time. But it's not Jesus' style to leave anyone for long in their doubt, failure, and hopelessness. Instead, He renewed His call on their lives. **"Throw your net on the right side of the boat and you'll find fish,"** he said to them. In effect, through the symbolism of directing his disciples to a great catch of fish, he was saying, **"There's Kingdom work to be done. I know where the opportunities are. Follow my lead."** Jesus' call on our lives is to leave our comfort zones and abandon ourselves to His service, trusting that as we follow

him, he'll work through us for the glory of His name and restore to us the joy of our salvation. That leads us to consider from our text ...

A CHALLENGE TO THE CHURCH

I think it's important to note that John's Gospel could easily have ended with the last two verses of chapter 20 –

“Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.”

Having completed his purpose for writing in the first 20 chapters, which was to clearly set forth that Jesus is the Son of God, whom to know is life eternal; John was not content to end there. **Chapter 21** is an **epilogue** that issues a **challenge to the church** – similar to the **Great Commission** challenge in the last chapter of Matthew's Gospel. The challenge in **John 21** is for the church to take up the task of making disciples, becoming **“fishers of men,”** continuing the work that Jesus' early disciples had begun.

RESPONDING IN THE RIGHT SPIRIT

With this in mind, notice the spirit in which this challenge is obeyed by Peter. John recognizes that the figure on the shore is the resurrected Jesus, but then the focus shifts to Peter. **Verse 7** says, ***“As soon as Simon Peter heard him (John) say, ‘It is the Lord,’ he wrapped his outer garment around himself ... and jumped into the water.”*** Impulsiveness was sometimes a problem for Peter, but on this occasion it illustrates a very desirable quality. Leaving the safety of the boat and jumping into the water illustrates that **Peter was fearless**. What prompted his fearlessness? It was Peter's hope of forgiveness,

represented by the figure of Jesus, the risen Christ, standing on the shore. Peter wanted to get to Jesus as quickly as possible. With his denial still fresh in his mind, Peter wasn't compelled to stay in the boat. Nor, having seen Jesus on the shore, was he persuaded to run and hide - he wanted to be near Jesus, in the hope of being forgiven.

Yes, Peter had denied his Lord three times on the night of Jesus' arrest, having earlier stated boldly, and perhaps arrogantly that he would never do so. But here, Peter didn't let his past failure get in the way. There was a strong desire for the forgiveness of Christ behind his mad dash to shore. In fact, in **vv. 15-17** of our text, we read of Peter's restoration, as three times Jesus asks Peter, "***Simon, do you love me?***" And after Peter answered in the affirmative each time, Jesus says to Simon, "***Feed my lambs,***" "***Take care of my sheep,***" "***Feed my sheep.***" Notice there were three positive affirmations from Jesus – one for each of Peter's three denials.

We must not minimize the seriousness of Peter's denial on the evening of Jesus' arrest. It is mentioned in all four gospels. Peter's denial meant that true ministry was now impossible for him unless his sin was dealt with. **On the one hand, he could have spent the balance of his life beating himself up for his failings, trying to be zealous for the kingdom, but promoting the cause of Christ out of his own sense of guilt.** From this position, Peter could have become aggressively self-righteous and judgmental, intolerant of others' weaknesses and inflexible toward those who were less serious about the faith than he was. Commentator **Gary Burge** calls this spirit "**Protestant Penance,**" which often comes across as a harsh,

judgmental attitude, devoid of mercy and compassion. **On the other hand, Peter could have become a man filled with despair and self-loathing because of his failure, thinking that he was unworthy of the love and respect of Jesus and his fellow disciples, leading him to withdraw and spend his life hiding in the shadows, or to continue serving, but without joy, under a sense of guilty compulsion.** Either way, unless Peter's sin was dealt with, he would know nothing of ministry that flows from a heart of rejoicing over the mercy and grace of Jesus and His forgiving love. That's why it is so wonderful to see Peter splashing through the shallows to reach Jesus. His heart is receptive to God's grace and ready for restoration.

Make no mistake, as modern day disciples, we fail too. **Like Peter, we're all too aware of our own weaknesses and inconsistencies. Have our past failures made us harsh, rigid, and inflexible in our dealings with others? Or do we carry a burden of despair, pessimism and negativity that drives us into the shadows, making it hard for others to be around us? I have good news today. By God's grace, Christ forgives and restores us, renewing his call on us to enter joyfully and enthusiastically into his service, just as Peter did.** The work of the church can go forward only when we are relieved of the destructive memories from our past and set free by the gracious forgiveness of God. When this happens, we will be renewed in our calling to serve Christ, empowered and transformed by His love, and made ready to represent Jesus with rejoicing hearts.

CONCLUSION

As disciples of Christ, leave behind preoccupation with personal comfort, condescending self-righteousness, or guilt driven despair, and swim, or run, as fast as you can toward shore – like Peter did – and find breakfast on the fire and our resurrected Savior awaiting us with words of forgiveness, hope, and a renewed sense of Kingdom calling. Blessed be His Name. **A-men.**