

John 21:15–19 — Lovest Thou Me?

The Public Restoration of Peter, the Two Words for Love, and the Pastoral Ministry

Scripture Reading: John 21:15–19

“So when they had dined, Jesus saith to Simon Peter, Simon, son of Jonas, lovest thou me more than these? He saith unto him, Yea, Lord; thou knowest that I love thee. He saith unto him, Feed my lambs.

He saith to him again the second time, Simon, son of Jonas, lovest thou me? He saith unto him, Yea, Lord; thou knowest that I love thee. He saith unto him, Feed my sheep.

He saith unto him the third time, Simon, son of Jonas, lovest thou me? Peter was grieved because he said unto him the third time, Lovest thou me? And he said unto him, Lord, thou knowest all things; thou knowest that I love thee. Jesus saith unto him, Feed my sheep.

Verily, verily, I say unto thee, When thou wast young, thou girdest thyself, and walkedst whither thou wouldst: but when thou shalt be old, thou shalt stretch forth thy hands, and another shall gird thee, and carry thee whither thou wouldst not.

This spake he, signifying by what death he should glorify God. And when he had spoken this, he saith unto him, Follow me.”

Simon, Son of Jonas: The Flesh Named

The Lord addresses Peter as Simon, son of Jonas — not Peter, the name the Lord himself had given him. He uses the natural name and traces the lineage in the flesh. That is because the flesh was the source of the problem. It was Simon, son

of Jonas, who boasted on the night of the Lord's betrayal: Although all others should forsake you, yet will not I. He had named himself in contrast to everyone else, in a most self-flattering way. The Lord now brings that same contrast before him in public: Lovest thou me more than these? It was put before him in front of the other disciples — this is not a private conversation. The flesh is addressed publicly because the failure had been public. Just as Jacob is used when the worm, the crook, is in view, and Israel when the prince with God is in view — Simon, son of Jonas is the name of the failing man.

The Two Words for Love

A distinction in the Greek text illuminates the whole passage. In verses 15 and 16, the Lord uses the word *agapao* for love — the word used of God's love in John 3:16, the stronger, divine word. In both cases, Peter responds with *phileo* — the word for brotherly attachment. J.N. Darby's translation renders it: Thou knowest that I am attached to thee. Peter would not use the Lord's word. The self that had made the boast had been judged. He was not going to make a claim. He was not going to say I love you with that stronger word and put himself back in the same position from which he had fallen. He simply says: Lord, you know I am attached to you. Leave it with your knowledge. Make no claim.

In verse 17, the Lord changes his own word to Peter's word: Do you have brotherly affection for me? And that is when Peter was grieved. He understood. The Lord had come down to his level — and that was its own kind of searching. And then: Lord, thou knowest all things; thou knowest that I am attached to thee. Not even now does he use the stronger word. He rests in the Lord's omniscience. You know everything; you know my heart; I leave it there. That is the place of true humility after self-judgment.

Three Times: The Threefold Cord of Restoration

The Lord asked three times, and the deliberateness of that number is plain. Peter denied the Lord three times. He had been given a private interview — that was for the restoration of communion. What this public scene provides is the opportunity to declare his affection for the Lord three times before the same company. What if the Lord had stopped after two? Peter would have been forever the man who denied the Lord three times and confessed his love twice. The Lord did not stop at two. He pressed the third time — which grieved Peter, because it seemed like a repetition — and in that grief is itself the evidence of his restored soul. And so Peter is now the man who denied the Lord three times and, in public, affirmed his attachment to him three times. A threefold cord is not easily broken.

Feed My Lambs, Shepherd My Sheep, Feed My Sheep

The three commissions are not identical. The first is Feed my lambs. The second, in verse 16, is Shepherd my sheep — the Lord's word there is not feed but tend, shepherd. The third is Feed my sheep. Lambs that are hungry need food; sheep need shepherding whether they are hungry or not. The provision is for both conditions — both the hungry and the directionless, the needing of food and the needing of guidance and protection.

Three times the Lord says My: my lambs, my sheep, my sheep. That possessive is important. In 1 Peter 5:2 Peter himself writes, Shepherd the flock of God which is among you — the flock of God, not my flock. And John 10 had already declared it: there shall be one flock, one shepherd. For any man to speak of my flock is to divide up what the Lord has kept undivided. The flock among you is part of the one flock — it is the Lord's, and only his.

Peter's epistles carry out this commission. First Peter takes up purity — pure food for the Lord's people; second Peter takes up corruption and warns against the corruption that threatens. The sheep need both: the green pastures and the

warning against the wolf. First Peter 5:4 adds that when the chief shepherd is manifested, the faithful shepherds will receive the unfading crown of glory. The crown belongs to what follows the manifestation of the chief shepherd, not to anything claimed now. And 1 Peter 2:25 — written by the very man who denied the Lord three times — says: Ye were as sheep going astray, but are now returned unto the shepherd and bishop of your souls. Peter is himself the example of what he preaches.

The Death That Would Glorify God

Peter had said, on the night of the betrayal, that he was willing to die for the Lord. He did not. The will was in it, and the self was in it. Here in verses 18 and 19, the Lord restores him so fully that what Peter had boasted of in the flesh — the willingness to die for the Lord — becomes his actual appointed portion. When you were young you girded yourself and walked where you wanted. When you are old, another will gird you and carry you where you would not.

This is a word of profound grace. Peter had not earned this. The Lord gives it to him as his appointment. He will die a martyr's death and by it glorify God. The cross that Peter had boasted about in his own strength becomes the cross he walks to in the Lord's strength, after self has been judged and laid aside. To seek martyrdom for one's own distinction is not what Scripture commends; the martyr's death glorifies God precisely because it is appointed, not sought. And there is a bearing here on the imminency of the Lord's coming: Peter, the Lord said, was already not young. His death could come at any time. The early believers, reading this, had essentially an any-moment expectation unchanged from our own — Peter's appointed death was shortly (2 Peter 1:14), which meant it could be any day.

And when he had spoken this, he saith unto him, Follow me. The great commission from John's Gospel is not a geographical mission but a personal call.

Follow me. This is God the Son speaking directly to a soul. It is of universal application — every reader of John receives it. It takes precedence over comparing ourselves with others, over curiosity about what the Lord is doing in another's life, over discouragements arising from seeing fellow believers fail. What is that to thee? Follow thou me.

Lovest thou me? Feed my sheep. Follow me.