

## John 21: The Rehabilitation of Peter

We've all met them at one time or another. It's the guy who makes all sorts of promises, then never follows through. Well, perhaps they do sometimes, but too often they don't, and it is those times we remember. Of course, they have no intent to deceive; they aren't hateful or sly. Indeed, they want very much to be loved, and will offer whatever we really need or want in order to have that love and admiration. Therein lies the flaw: they want to be admired, too.

Their fatal flaw is that they see themselves as something they are not. They live in a fantasy world where they are always the hero. In that world they are somebody. They don't realize that most people tagged as "heroes" don't set out to be that. Real heroes are focused on their duties and the needs of others from the start, and manage to meet those needs against great odds. The false hero is focused on being a hero and seeks ways to prove it, making it appear they face great odds. The only genuine difficulty they face is their own inadequacy.

It's not that they are such losers in the first place. It's that they are simply no better than anyone else, with the common measure of frailty that is the lot of humanity. It is this they reject by retreating into the fantasy world. If they get over their fantasy vision of themselves and of their world, they usually turn out to be great people. Sadly, most never escape to reality.

The Apostle Peter was just such a man.

When we examine the details of Peter's actions in the Gospels, much of what is recorded makes no sense unless we picture him as physically larger than average. It's almost certain he was the eldest of the Twelve, as well, and may have been older than Jesus by a few years. There is too much we don't know of the customs surrounding rabbis and their disciples – and there were many in Jesus' day. Still, an imposing size and a certain amount of charisma would explain how he had lived so long in his fantasy. He was seldom forced to face reality. Who would call him to account? He could bluster, threaten, or simply talk his way out of it, and hold his self-image intact.

After serving for a time as Jesus' disciple, he made a boasting promise that, even if all the other disciples fell away and abandoned Jesus in a time of serious trouble, Peter would not. Peter would willingly go to the grave with Jesus (John 13:37; Mark 14:29-31). No doubt, Peter believed this of himself. Never mind that Peter had no realistic accounting of his true abilities; he was certain of his heroic intentions. Jesus bluntly warned him that, not only would he not valiantly die for his Master, but would heartily deny knowing Him. Jesus precisely pegged the

time frame of this denial, too.

Who can imagine the sorrow and pain Peter felt, when having just made that third denial in the High Priest's courtyard, Jesus turned and locked eyes with him from the open hall, just up the steps from where Peter stood by the fire? More than just the shame and guilt, it was the end of Peter's fantasy world. Face to face he came with the truth: he was no hero. He was not even a good man, for he had denied his Lord. He deserved to die, for more than one reason, but hadn't the courage even to face that. He fled the courtyard weeping.

Over the hours and days following Jesus' death, his world received one earthquake after another. The empty tomb, the unexpected appearance of Jesus in a secure room, and more that is not recorded. Is it any wonder he was slow to catch on to what it all meant? He wasn't even sure who he was for a time there, much less could he feel he grasped reality outside of his own head. Then came that day on the shore of Galilee.

Seeking to regain some sense of normalcy, Peter went fishing – the one thing he knew, the one thing that hadn't changed in the past few weeks. It was surely no surprise when they caught nothing. It made the small boat with seven men seem empty, as did yet Peter's world – the new world of reality that he didn't know. Suddenly, from the shore, a man who somehow seemed important, hailed them and asked if they had a catch. Perhaps he was looking to buy it, as many merchants did, eager in the early morning's gray light to beat out other buyers. This one wasn't waiting until they came ashore to process the catch.

When they answered no, he suggested they drop the net on the right side of the boat, even though the daylight had probably already driven the fish well below the reach of their net. For some reason, they complied with this odd request. The result was shocking, for instantly the net was almost dragged from their grasp! There were so many fish caught in the mesh that they couldn't lift it without the boat heeling far over, nearly enough to let the sea water in over the side.

John, who never seemed to miss anything, turned to Peter and said, "It's the Lord!" Without hesitation, Peter grabbed his robe, slung it on hastily, and dove in the sea. He was able to swim to shore, some 100 yards (90 meters), faster than the remaining six men could row the boat in, dragging the net still in the water. By the time they brought the boat in, they found a fire had already been going, and a nice breakfast was cooking.

Jesus instructed them to bring some of the fresh catch. Peter, big bruiser that he was, single-handedly hauled the net up on the beach. The crew set about the task of examining the fish with some excitement, as none had seen so many, and so

large, since they could remember. The count was 153 large edible fish. That was more than many fishermen caught in *two* nights' work! Then some recalled it was like that the day Jesus preached from the prow of a small boat, while the crowd of listeners covered the shore. After the huge catch that day, again too late in the morning for the fish to be near the surface, Peter had a lucid moment of truth, and confessed his unworthiness to be Jesus' disciple. Instead, Jesus said something perplexing about fishing for souls, and invited Peter to join His ministry full time, along with Peter's brother and two cousins (Luke 5:1-11).

Jesus instructed them to all gather around the fire and have breakfast. What a meal that was! Nothing fancy – just the flat disks of bread, and fresh fish, cooked over an open fire – but they were with the Master, and something about His resurrected presence was just too much for words, even though His manner wasn't significantly different. They knew it was Him, yet in some way, it wasn't the same Rabbi as before. This was the third time in as many weeks He had appeared to them, and only once were they all together: the last visit in the Upper Room of one wealthy supporter, near the Eastern Gate, inside Jerusalem's city walls.

In the afterglow of breakfast, as the men were becoming sleepy after fishing all night, Jesus sat next to Peter and looked at him for a long moment, in that relaxed and friendly way He had. While nearly overcome as yet with joy at seeing his best friend ever, Peter was nonetheless felt the fire of shame burning in the background. Peter had betrayed Him at the moment of truth.

Jesus spoke. "So Peter, do you love Me sacrificially? Would you be willing to give your life for me, even if these others would not?" (John used the word *agape* for love here.)

For once Peter refused to flee. "Yes Lord, I love you as my best friend." In spite of his "yes" the impact of his words was actually a "not quite that much," as Peter was being honest. He had failed, and there was no point pretending with the Messiah what He surely knew. All that had been stripped away. Might as well admit his weakness. "I'm not there yet." (John records Peter using the word *phileo* for love.)

Jesus seemed to accept this, and invited him to take over the leadership of the ministry. "Take My lambs out to pasture and feed them."

Peter mulled this over for moment. As if He had forgotten the exchange from just moments before, Jesus spoke again, almost formally, "Simon, John's son, do you love me sacrificially?" (*agape*).

Peter responded, "Yes, Lord. You know that you are my best friend, and that I

have great affection for You" (*phileo*).

Nodding His acceptance, Jesus said, "Shepherd My sheep."

Peter glanced at Jesus, wondering where this was going. A few minutes passed, as if the matter was closed, when Jesus turned and asked bluntly, "Are you my friend?" (*phileo*).

Crumbling emotionally under the weight of realization, Peter answered almost formally, "There is nothing in Creation hidden from You. You know that I am Your friend." Thrice he had denied Him; thrice he was asked if there was any more bluster about the quality of his commitment. He had a long way to go, and he knew it. There was for now no comfort in truth, though.

Clearly, Jesus was holding forth forgiveness. "Take my sheep out to pasture." He still wanted Peter to take charge of the ministry begun those three years ago, seeming to arise from that of John the Baptist. John's blunt speech, his flair for drama, and the surety he had in his message had first drawn Peter. But more than that was the talk of John as "Herald of the Messiah." When Andrew, who was a part-time disciple of John, came and told Peter that the Messiah had been found, Peter willingly joined Jesus to see what part he could play in the New Kingdom. Surely there was room for a hero like himself?

There was little of that man left in Peter now. Here he was being told what part he would play in the New Kingdom, but a kingdom also far removed from what Peter imagined three years ago. While Peter could hardly hope to fill the Messiah's sandals, he was being asked to do just that, in a sense. In spite of Peter's utter failure at a moment when Jesus needed him most, the Master was calling him to serve as the leader of the Twelve (now eleven, but no matter).

"Peter, there will come a day when you will indeed die for Me. As a young man, no one dressed you. You went where you pleased, and did what you wished." His independent upbringing had a part in making Peter the man he was. Lack of supervision contributed to his slide into the fantasy land. "When you are old, they will dress you as they wish, and where they take you, you will not want to go." This would turn out to be a prophecy of how Peter would die, as a prisoner for the Gospel.

And in the years to come before that end, though Peter could not have known it that morning on the shore of Galilee, he would indeed become the big leader, hero of the early church in Jerusalem. His adventures had just begun. He was everything he had always believed he should be, yet none of the things he thought he was. At long last, he could put aside the small sword he had carried all those years, easily hidden on his large frame. His new sword was in his heart,

and in his mouth: the Word of God.

Ed Hurst

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