

Text: John 21:15-25

Title: "Believe because the witness of Peter and John is true"

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Introduction: Peter was martyred in A.D. 64 under the tyranny of Nero. We learn of his martyrdom from Clement of Rome, who wrote about it in A.D. 96. Early in the third century, Tertullian remembered Peter's death as a crucifixion. John wants his readers to understand that Jesus had predicted this crucifixion of Peter (v. 18).

One commentator (Carson) explains that the phrase in verse 18, *you shall stretch out your hands*, referred in the ancient world to the way a victim of crucifixion had their hands stretched apart on the crossbar of his cross, which he then had to carry to the place of his crucifixion. Peter had just witnessed Jesus enduring this for him.

Here, Jesus told Peter that he would endure the same execution for the Savior whom he loved. Peter, who had denied the Lord three times on the night of His crucifixion, had been found previously by the risen Lord and restored to forgiven fellowship with Him (1 Cor. 15:5, Luke 24:34). Jesus dried Peter's tears after his bitter weeping. Peter's restoration to useful service continues in our passage.

It is very possible that it was this death of Peter that prompted the publication of the Gospel of John. Although perhaps somewhat younger than Peter (certainly a faster runner), John was getting up in years, and a rumor had spread among the churches that he would not die, but rather live until the coming of the Lord (vv. 22-23). Peter's death may have reminded John that he could be next. Seeing the need to redirect his readers from this false rumor toward his true witness, John concludes his Gospel with this account,

affirming the trustworthiness both of Peter's ministry and of his own writings.

And so, the theme of this final paragraph of John's Gospel is that we must believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and believing have life in His name, because the witness of Peter and John is true. The witness of Peter's martyrdom is a true witness, and the witness of John's Gospel is a true witness. Jesus is the authority that confirms the veracity of both of these witnesses. His confirmations first of Peter and then of John will outline the passage for us.

I. Jesus confirms the witness of Peter as true (vv. 15-19).

Illustration: Ecclesiastes 4:9-10 says, "Two are better than one; because they have a good reward for their labor. For if they fall, the one will lift up his fellow: but woe to him that is alone when he falleth; for he hath not another to help him up." That, of course, is a general principle with wide application. If you have two on your team, you can typically do more than if you only have one.

Application: The Apostle John follows that principle when it comes to the vocabulary of this passage. Where John might have used one word, he uses two. At times, our English versions have trouble duplicating the two Greek words with two different English words, because where the Greeks had two words, we typically use just one.

In our passage, John uses two different words for *sheep*, two different words for *caring for sheep*, two different words for *loving*, and two different words for *knowing*. The use of two words for these concepts is better than the use of one word, because the use of two words communicates fuller truth than the use of one word can by itself. I want us to notice

these pairs of synonyms and the way they show that Jesus confirmed the witness of Peter as true.

1. The two words for *sheep* are *lamb* (v. 15) and *sheep* (vv. 16-17). The distinction is a simple one. Lambs are the younger of the flock, and sheep are the older. Every true shepherd whom Jesus sends will recognize that the flock of God includes both age-levels of sheep. We must not expect the lambs to be able to do what the sheep do, nor should we be satisfied with sheep who are still acting like lambs.

Luke found that second problem common among the Hebrew Christians of the first century: “For when for the time ye ought to be teachers, ye have need that one teach you again which be the first principles of the oracles of God; and are become such as have need of milk, and not of strong meat. For every one that useth milk is unskillful in the word of righteousness: for he is a babe. But strong meat belongeth to them that are of full age, even those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil” (Heb. 5:12-14).

Have we, who have been saved for some time, progressed to the point of making a disciple and teaching others the clear difference between good and evil? Or do we still have some “first principles” to take care of? Jesus’s two words for *sheep* teach us that lambs should become mature over time.

2. The two words for *caring for sheep* are *feed* (vv. 15, 17) and *tend* or *shepherd* (v. 16). Both young lambs and older sheep must be fed, but they are able to digest different foods. As we just noted in Hebrews, some need milk, but others must progress to strong meat. And those who have progressed in this way are especially in need of the shepherding work of the shepherd whom Jesus has sent into their lives. Under-

shepherds not only feed the sheep, they shepherd the sheep, holding them accountable to follow the Lord.

Peter learned to shepherd well, and he wrote to others about how to do it in his First Epistle: "The elders which are among you I exhort, who am also an elder, and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, and also a partaker of the glory that shall be revealed: Feed [Tend/Shepherd] the flock of God which is among you, taking the oversight thereof, not by constraint, but willingly; not for filthy lucre, but of a ready mind; neither as being lords over God's heritage, but being examples to the flock. And when the chief Shepherd shall appear, ye shall receive a crown of glory that fadeth not away" (5:1-4).

Of great importance in Peter's instruction to fellow elders is the phrase *flock of God*. In our passage in John, Jesus speaks of "My sheep" and "My lambs." Paul told the Ephesian elders that the members of their local church were "the flock of God, which He has purchased with His own blood" (Acts 20:28). Our church is Jesus's church, not a building, but the people. We are His sheep. Our work is His work. Our finances are His finances. Our safety and care is a charge that on Himself He has laid. *Feed* and *shepherd* are two forms of care faithful shepherds must give God's lambs and sheep.

3. The two words for *love* are *agape* – the love of selfless choice, and *phileo* – the love of natural relationship. These are not contradictory, but complementary. They go together in the Scripture. They are interchangeable, but not indistinguishable. Both are blessed qualities of virtue.

In His first two questions, Jesus asks about the love of Peter's selfless choice for Him – Peter's *agape*. The first question adds a comparative phrase – "Do you love me *more than these*?" I think *these* refers in this context, not to the other disciples, but to the fish they had just had for breakfast. Peter's

answer was “Yes, I do love you more than these,” and I do not believe that he would have claimed still to love the Lord more than his fellow-disciples after having been humbled by his denials and restoration.

Peter confesses the love of natural relationship for Jesus – his *phileo*. He had not always chosen selflessly, but he always had love Jesus as his Lord. He loved the Lord more than the comforts of life, like a good breakfast. He was unlike many believers today, who love self, money, and pleasure more than they love God. He was not like Demas who abandoned Paul because he loved this present world.

Peter’s answer appeals to Jesus’s omniscience for support – “you know all things” (v. 17). He knew that Jesus knew he had left all to follow Him. Yes, he had been fishing recently again, but that was not where his heart was. When he heard that Jesus was on the shore, he not only stopped fishing, he jumped into the water and swam to shore.

Jesus’s third question dismays Peter, because it takes the form of questioning the two affirmations that Peter had already made. Peter had used *phileo* to affirm his love for the Lord, but now Jesus uses Peter’s word for love in this question: “Do you love me in a personal relationship?” He did so, not because He thought Peter was untruthful, but because He wanted Peter to have the chance to say it one more time. He wanted Peter to know that His forgiveness of Peter went as far as Peter’s denials had gone. Peter gave his answer.

4. The two words for *knowing* are *the knowledge of omniscience* and *the knowledge of personal experience*. The first two times, Peter’s answer cites the Lord’s omniscience for support: “Lord, You know that I love you” (vv. 15-16). With this final challenge, Peter tells Jesus – “You know that I love you as my Lord and Savior by your own personal experience.”

Jesus does not argue the point. He did know by personal experience that Peter loved Him. Peter's failure was a temporary fall, and the just man falls seven times and rises up again (Prov. 24:16). Likely referring to their previous meeting, when Peter likely had confessed his sin to the Lord, he tells the Lord – "You know from personal experience that I love you with the natural love of personal relationship."

So in summary, Jesus confirms Peter as a true witness because, in spite of his failures, he really did love the Lord, and his willingness to confess his sin of denial and to be restored to fellowship with the Lord demonstrated the validity of his love and readied him for renewed ministry blessing. In fact, Peter's love would go on to earn the martyr's crown.

We can recover from our failures the same way. If we love the Lord enough to confess all the times we failed to love the Lord, Jesus will confirm the truth of our witness for Him.

II. Jesus confirms the witness of John as true (vv. 20-25).

Application: John calls himself *the disciple whom Jesus loved*, and he reminds us about how close he was to Jesus during the Passover Supper (v. 20). This may be a human form of the closeness enjoyed by God the Father and God the Son, who is in the bosom of the Father (John 1:18). To know and love Christ closely is the first requirement to be a witness.

Illustration: I am reading Charles Bridge's classic on *The Christian Ministry*, and I was struck by a powerful sentence. It appears in Part 3 of the book, "Causes of ministerial inefficiency connected with our personal character," Section 8 titled, "Absence or defect of personal religion." The line simply reads, "For how awful is it to appear as a Minister, without being really a Christian! to have a competency, and even (by continual exercise) an increase of Ministerial gifts, while

our real character is only that we 'have a name that we live, but we are dead!' How difficult! how dreadful! to preach an unknown Saviour!"

John never preached an unknown Savior. He writes about the One he knew well. Jesus is the great Word who was with God in the beginning, and who was God. If all that God's Son has done were to be put down on paper, the world itself could not contain the books. John's witness is the true witness of the Savior he knew. How well do we know Him?

The martyrdom of Peter under Nero's cruelty may have discouraged some from loving Christ the way Peter had. John explains that Peter's death was predicted by Jesus and that it glorified God. Countering the temptation to continue in unbelief, John published his Gospel to give us reasons to believe that Jesus is the Christ the Son of God, and believing have life in His name (20:31).

Conclusion: And so to review, we must believe because Jesus is the Word become flesh and John the Baptist was His forerunner, because the Spirit anointed Him for His messianic mission and His disciples followed Him (ch. 1).

We must believe because of the messages of His mighty miracles. He turned water into wine (ch. 2), healed a nobleman's sick son (ch. 4), healed a lame man (ch. 5), fed 5000 families with five loaves and two fish (ch. 6), walked on water (ch. 6), healed a man born blind (ch. 9), and raised Lazarus from the dead (ch. 11). The greatest miracle of all was that He arose from the dead after dying on a Roman cross for our sins and after being buried dead in a tomb for three days (ch. 20).

We must believe with Nicodemus, because Jesus was the gift of the Father's love (ch. 3). We must believe with the Samaritans, because this love reaches the most desperate sinners

(ch. 4). Jesus is God's unique Son (ch. 5), the Bread of Life (ch. 6), the Light of the World (ch. 8), the Good Shepherd who gave His life for His sheep (ch. 10), the Resurrection and the Life, who conquered even His own death as well as the death of all who believe (ch. 11), and the True Vine, without whom we can do nothing (ch. 15). For these reasons we must believe.

We must believe because Jesus sent the Holy Spirit to lead His apostles and prophets into all the truth (chs. 14-16), and He prayed a high priestly prayer in our behalf (ch. 17). We must believe because John, one of these apostles, wrote his Gospel so that we would believe. We must believe because the world could not contain all the many Gospels that might have been written about Jesus, though they never were.

As we conclude our time in John's Gospel together, it leaves us with a simple question: "Do you believe?" Do you believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God? Do you have life in His name? To persist in unbelief is inexcusable, for we have the true witness of lives like Peter's and of books like John's.

"A man came—I think it was actually in Philadelphia—on one occasion to the great George Whitefield and asked if he might print his sermons. Whitefield gave this reply; he said, 'Well, I have no inherent objection, if you like, but you will never be able to put on the printed page the lightning and the thunder.' That is the distinction—the sermon, and the 'lightning and the thunder.' To Whitefield this was of very great importance, and it should be of very great importance to all preachers, as I hope to show. You can put the sermon into print, but not the lightning and the thunder. That comes into the act of preaching and cannot be conveyed by cold print. Indeed it almost baffles the descriptive powers of the best reporters."

—David Martin Lloyd-Jones,

*Preachers and Preaching*