

Epilogue: Restoring Peter

Books and movies often have what we call an epilogue. An epilogue comes after the high point or climax of the whole story. It comments on and concludes the whole thing, tying things together. The word epilogue in English actually comes from a Greek word which means the additional word.

The Gospel of John has an epilogue in chapter 21. It is not the highpoint of the book. It is not the grand summary of the book either. We've seen that in chapter 20, when Thomas confesses Jesus as Lord and God, and John then comments that he wrote the book so the we, the readers, would come to the same confession as Thomas, that we would embrace Jesus for all He is.

But there remains a loose end to still be wrapped up. That loose end has to do with Simon Peter. What do we do with Peter, who denied Jesus three times? Did Peter really believe? Or was Peter like Judas, like the many in the book with false faith?

All the Gospels tell us that Peter boasted he would die for Jesus. 29 Peter said to Him, "Even if all are made to stumble, yet I will not be." (Mark 14:29). All the Gospels tell us that Peter denied Jesus three times over, around a fire, with John quite likely standing opposite him. And we read that on the third denial, Jesus was being led from one place to another, and looked over, and looked into Peter's eyes. Matthew and Luke both use the words "Peter went out and wept bitterly".

He denied his Lord when it counted. He did not perform better than the other disciples, as he'd boasted he would. He is not a clear leader of the apostles, hardly the rock on which Christ would build His church. And it seems he did not go to the cross, was not there when Jesus died.

But open the book of Acts, and in chapter 1, he is leading the apostles to choose a successor for Judas. In chapter 2, it is he who preaches at Pentecost, and 3000 are saved. In chapter 3, he and John go to the Temple and heal a lame man, and again, he preaches a sermon to crowds. The authorities arrest Peter and John, and demand an account.

⁸ Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them, "Rulers of the people and elders of Israel: ⁹ If we this day are judged for a good deed *done* to a helpless man, by what means he has been made well, ¹⁰ let it be known to you all, and to all the people of Israel, that by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead, by Him this man stands here before you whole. ¹¹ This is the *'stone which was rejected by you builders, which has become the chief cornerstone.'* ¹² Nor is there salvation in any other, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved." ¹³ Now when they saw the boldness of Peter and John, and perceived that they were uneducated and untrained men, they marveled. And they realized that they had been with Jesus. (Acts 4:8–13)

There is no hint in the closing chapters of Matthew, Mark, or Luke that the impulsive, rash and, in the end, cowardly Peter would become the natural leader of the others. How did the weeping bitterly Peter of Thursday and Good Friday become the bold, zealous, earnest Peter of Pentecost?

We might say, "the Resurrection of Jesus". And I think that would indeed be a major answer. But what about those denials? What about the embarrassment and humiliation of failure in front of the others? And why would the others have accepted him as a leader after what he did?

John wrote his Gospel anywhere between twenty and forty years after Matthew, Mark, and Luke. As we've seen, he recorded what the others didn't. He fill in the gaps and answered questions such as, How was Peter restored? And by God's providence, it has been arranged to fall exactly behind Acts 1.

Here is inspired Scripture to encourage the most discouraged believer. If Peter can be restored, anyone can. If someone who denied Jesus three times can become a unflinching, courageous preacher willing to face anything for Christ, then there is hope for all of us. If you can go from weeping bitterly over your utter failure as a Christian, to seeing 3000 people respond to your evangelism, any true believer can be restored. How did it happen?

I. Peter Returned to His First Fervency

John 21:1 After these things Jesus showed Himself again to the disciples at the Sea of Tiberias, and in this way He showed Himself: 2 Simon Peter, Thomas called the Twin, Nathanael of Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two others of His disciples were together. 3 Simon Peter said to them, "I am going fishing." They said to him, "We are going with you also." They went out and immediately got into the boat, and that night they caught nothing.

After the dramatic Passion week events which took place in Jerusalem, the disciples are back in the north, in their home province of Galilee. The angels at the tomb had told them to wait for him in Galilee. There are seven of the apostles together on this day: Peter, James, John, Thomas, Nathanael (or Bartholomew, as the other Gospels call him), and two others.

Peter announces, "I'm going fishing". Maybe this is out of necessity – but it does seem as if Peter is saying – I'm going to go back to what I used to do. Let me return to familiar waters. They all get into the boat, and fish all night with no success.

4 But when the morning had now come, Jesus stood on the shore; yet the disciples did not know that it was Jesus. 5 Then Jesus said to them, "Children, have you any food?" They answered Him, "No." 6 And He said to them, "Cast the net on the right side of the boat, and you will find some." So they cast, and now they were not able to draw it in because of the multitude of fish.

Now this miracle is an almost exact repeat of what Jesus did at the very beginning of His ministry, when He called them. On that occasion, Peter put up a protest, but then agreed.

4 When He had stopped speaking, He said to Simon, "Launch out into the deep and let down your nets for a catch." 5 But Simon answered and said to Him, "Master, we have toiled all night and caught nothing; nevertheless at Your word I will let down the net."

⁶ And when they had done this, they caught a great number of fish, and their net was breaking. ⁷ So they signaled to *their* partners in the other boat to come and help them. And they came and filled both the boats, so that they began to sink. ⁸ When Simon Peter saw *it*, he fell down at Jesus' knees, saying, "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord!" ⁹ For he and all who were with him were astonished at the catch of fish which they had taken; ¹⁰ and so also *were* James and John, the sons of Zebedee, who were partners with Simon. And Jesus said to Simon, "Do not be afraid. From now on you will catch men." ¹¹ So when they had brought their boats to land, they forsook all and followed Him. (Luke 5:6–11)

What happened the first time Jesus did this? Jesus showed His complete sovereignty over Peter's life. In an instant Jesus both fulfilled and shattered a fisherman's dream. A record-breaking catch, and yet it was achieved only because a carpenter told you to put your net in again.

Here is Jesus showing that with a command, He could fulfil your earthly dreams. Here is Jesus showing that provision will not be a problem. A bigger and greater work than fishing for mere fish beckons.

As the sovereign power of Jesus dawns on Peter, Peter bows in broken worship. But then Jesus says, don't be afraid, from now on you will catch men. In other words, if you surrender to me, I will make full use of your life; I will maximise your usefulness, I will cause you to live for eternity. What did they do? They forsook all, and followed him.

Jesus does not remind him of the Transfiguration, or of the raising of Lazarus, or of the feeding of

the 5000. He reminds Peter of the day he experienced Jesus calling him to Himself. Peter needed to be reminded of that moment where he saw Christ as holy and gracious and gave himself totally to Jesus. He needed to be reminded of when fishing seemed to fade into insignificance and all he wanted was to serve the Lord.

He brings Peter back to the first moments of full surrender, of being willing to forsake all, of being willing to seek first the kingdom of God. He reminds Peter that the real work of his life was meant to be catching people for Christ, not fish.

Why would the Lord remind a discouraged believer of this? Because nothing has changed from His side! He is still able to provide for us! He is still able to take your whole life and use it! He is still worthy of a complete consecration! What has changed? Our zeal, our commitment, our faith. This is why Jesus says to the church at Ephesus.

⁴ Nevertheless I have *this* against you, that you have left your first love. ⁵ Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent and do the first works, or else I will come to you quickly and remove your lampstand from its place—unless you repent. (Revelation 2:4–5)

Restoration begins by admitting and repenting of the lukewarmness in us, of the coldness, the fear, the spiritual laziness, the resistance, the cynicism, the doubt that has set in. He hasn't changed: He is still the God who can do that same miracle all over again.

Jesus reminds Peter of his first fervency.

⁷ Therefore that disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, "It is the Lord!" Now when Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he put on his outer garment (for he had removed it), and plunged into the sea. ⁸ But the other disciples came in the little boat (for they were not far from land, but about two hundred cubits), dragging the net with fish.

When the apostle John sees this, his memory is triggered. He knows this too much *deja-vu* to be coincidence. He says – it is the Lord. When Peter hears that it is Jesus on the shore, with characteristic Peter-zeal, he puts his overcoat over his fishing clothes and dives in to swim to shore.

⁹ Then, as soon as they had come to land, they saw a fire of coals there, and fish laid on it, and bread. ¹⁰ Jesus said to them, "Bring some of the fish which you have just caught." ¹¹ Simon Peter went up and dragged the net to land, full of large fish, one hundred and fifty-three; and although there were so many, the net was not broken. ¹² Jesus said to them, "Come *and* eat breakfast." Yet none of the disciples dared ask Him, "Who are You?"—knowing that it was the Lord. ¹³ Jesus then came and took the bread and gave it to them, and likewise the fish. ¹⁴ This *is* now the third time Jesus showed Himself to His disciples after He was raised from the dead. (John 21:9–14)

So the disciples arrive, dragging the fish, and Jesus has a charcoal fire ready for them with some food already there. Jesus does not ask them to come and meet His needs. He is there serving them, meeting their needs. Again, John implies that there was something unusual about the post-Resurrection appearance of Jesus. After all, if they knew who Jesus was, and they knew it was him, why would the question even come up? But it must have been a strange and slightly awkward meal.

After breakfast, Jesus then turns specifically to Peter for the second stage of Peter's restoration.

II. Peter Received Full Forgiveness

¹⁵ So when they had eaten breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon, son of Jonah, do you love Me more than these?" He said to Him, "Yes, Lord; You know that I love You." He said to him, "Feed My lambs." ¹⁶ He said to him again a second time, "Simon, son of Jonah, do you love Me?" He said to Him, "Yes, Lord; You know that I love You." He said to him, "Tend My sheep." ¹⁷ He said to him the third time, "Simon, son of Jonah, do you love Me?" Peter was grieved because He said to him the third time, "Do you love Me?" And

he said to Him, "Lord, You know all things; You know that I love You." Jesus said to him, "Feed My sheep.

Jesus waits until breakfast is over. This is not small talk, or private conversation. Jesus asks Peter a question. He addresses him by his full name – Simon son of Jonah. He is calling Peter by a formal title, addressing him formally in front of the other disciples. And in front of the others – what does He ask Peter? "Do you love me more than these?"

Peter, am I supreme in your loves? Am I first? Am I big and people small, or are people big and I am small? Peter fell through fear, through fearing what people would say or do to him. Now Jesus wants Peter to publicly re-order and renew his priorities. Do you love Me, Peter?

Peter replies, Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.

There are different words used here in the original language for love, but it is likely that our author is simply employing synonyms. He also uses two different words for lambs and sheep, two different words for tend and feed, and even two different words for when Peter says – you *know* that I love you. In the New Testament these two different words *agape* and *phileo* are used for both divine love and brotherly love, so we shouldn't make too much of the different words.

Again, Jesus, formally, publicly asks – Simon son of Jonah – do you love me? Peter says – Yes, Lord, you know I love you.

A third time, Jesus says- Peter do you love me? Peter is grieved. Why is grieved? What would three questions remind Peter of? His three denials.

But do you see what the Lord is letting Peter do? He is letting Peter undo His three denials. He denied Jesus three times publicly, and now Jesus, graciously lets him retract those denials and publicly affirm his love for Jesus. In front of the disciples he had possibly lost respect with, he turns his denials into worship. In other words, he is repenting. He is turning from his sin of denial and turning to the obedience of confession.

And with each statement, Jesus is forgiving Peter of his denials. How do we know? Because He follows it up with a task: Feed my lambs. Tend my sheep. Feed my sheep. In other words, I forgive you, I restore you to a place of usefulness and leadership: feed my people. Teach them. Tend them. Shepherd them. I forgive you, so feed my lambs. I forgive you, so tend my sheep. I forgive you, so feed my sheep.

I find it interesting the form of confession Jesus elicited from Peter. He didn't ask him "How could you have done that?" Peter didn't know. He was shocked by his own cowardice. The heart is above all else a deceitful thing, according to Jeremiah 17:9. No one knows his own heart fully. He didn't ask him, "Are you sorry?" Peter had wept bitterly. Besides, Judas also regretted his betrayal, but it didn't mean he was repentant. He didn't ask, "Will you ever do that again?" Peter didn't know the future.

Jesus instead asks Peter where his desires are. "What do you want" is a question that reveals if we have repented. Do you still want that sin, that old life, that idol, that worldliness? When Peter says, I love you more than these, he is saying forgive me for loving you less.

Fully confessing our sins to the Lord, repenting of them, and trusting in His forgiveness has great healing power for our souls. Many discouraged, downhearted, defeated Christians are basically at root, feeling guilty. They feel shame, guilt, and they lack spiritual boldness. Their conscience is like a wounded animal, shivering with fear and cowering from touch. They keep retreating from God, from His Word, from church, from the light, because they feel it will hurt too much, it will be the

agony of guilt, or shame, of seeing my sin and failure. What amazing healing is waiting for the Christian who reverses his sin with confession. Yes Lord I sinned, but I love you, more than the sin I chose. Please forgive me. Rising up from there are multiple comforting promises:

⁹ If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us *our* sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. (1 John 1:9)

²⁰ For if our heart condemns us, God is greater than our heart, and knows all things. (1 John 3:20)

¹ *There is* therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus, who do not walk according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit. (Romans 8:1)

¹ Blessed *is he* whose transgression is forgiven, *Whose* sin is covered. (Psalm 32:1)

Peter has been returned to a full surrender. He has received a full forgiveness. But Jesus has not completed the restoration of Peter. There are some finishing touches to turn the Peter of the Gospels into the Peter of Acts.

III. Peter Renewed a Firm Faithfulness

¹⁸ Most assuredly, I say to you, when you were younger, you girded yourself and walked where you wished; but when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and another will gird you and carry *you* where you do not wish.” ¹⁹ This He spoke, signifying by what death he would glorify God. And when He had spoken this, He said to him, “Follow Me.”

Jesus now gives Peter a strange but comforting prediction. The prediction is that Peter will grow older, and in his old age, he would no longer have the freedom and independence of his youth. Instead, someone else would bind and take Peter somewhere he'd prefer not to go. John tells us that this was Jesus telling Peter that he would die for Jesus. Peter would die as a martyr. Indeed, Peter actually says this in his last letter, 2 Peter. ¹⁴ knowing that shortly I *must* put off my tent, just as our Lord Jesus Christ showed me. (2 Peter 1:14)

Now why would this be a comforting prediction? Well, Peter had just failed at the moment of testing. Instead of standing for Jesus, he had denied Jesus three times. He had not endured, persevered or passed the test. Here Jesus tells him that in the future, when the ultimate test comes, Peter would willingly die for the name of Christ. Fear will not triumph, but faith, and Peter will endure.

The command sums it up. Follow me. Peter, you have been reminded of that full surrender. You are forgiven. I assure you that you will not deny Me again. So now, put your head down, and follow me. Commit. Obey. Be faithful.

Peter is to do what Paul says: ¹³ one thing *I do*, forgetting those things which are behind and reaching forward to those things which are ahead, ¹⁴ I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. (Philippians 3:13–14)

That's a firm, singleminded focus. I know what I am living for; I know where I am going, I know what the reward is, I know what the cost may be, I know what the sufferings may be. But like a pilgrim, I keep going on the same road until I reach the destination.

Faithfulness is focused on the prize, on the destination.

But Peter had a perennial problem with focus. You remember that when Jesus walked on water, Peter asked Jesus to enable him to walk out on the water towards him. And for a few steps, he did.

³⁰ But when he saw that the wind was boisterous, he was afraid; and beginning to sink he cried out, saying, "Lord, save me!" (Matthew 14:30)

Peter lost his focus on the Lord, got distracted, and began to sink. Here again, he is renewing his focused faithfulness on the Lord, and look what happens next.

²⁰ Then Peter, turning around, saw the disciple whom Jesus loved following, who also had leaned on His breast at the supper, and said, "Lord, who is the one who betrays You?" ²¹ Peter, seeing him, said to Jesus, "But Lord, what *about* this man?" ²² Jesus said to him, "If I will that he remain till I come, what *is that* to you? You follow Me." (John 21:18–22)

After the Lord has restored him and told him about his future, Peter looks at John and says, what about him, Lord?

Now in truth, why should it matter at all to Peter what happens to John except a kind of curiosity which seeks to divert attention off the work God is doing in his heart? So the Lord has to rebuke him gently and say, If I want him to live until my return, what is that to you? And again, He repeats – you follow Me. Don't be distracted by others.

You might think this is a minor point, but comparing yourself with others is deadly to the work God is doing in your heart. The sin of comparing destroys focus, and weakens faithfulness. Jesus had already warned about how man pleasing destroys faith.

⁴⁴ How can you believe, who receive honour from one another, and do not seek the honour that *comes* from the only God? (John 5:44)

Comparing yourself to others, either favourably or negatively distracts you from single-minded faithfulness. It gets your eyes off Christ, off His salvation, off Him as your first love, and onto others. Comparisons are deadly to devotion.

That's why people in Scripture who were committing to God were so singleminded, so oblivious of the crowd.

¹⁵ "And if it seems evil to you to serve the LORD, choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods which your fathers served that were on the other side of the River, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you dwell. But as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD." (Jos 24:15)

"How committed are the other people at church? How much do they seek the Lord? So-and-so, he's a deacon, and he doesn't do x. She is the wife of so-and-so, and I don't see her doing this or that? What about him – he teaches in church, but I haven't seen him do that." Why does the Christian life seem to work for him? How come it comes so easily to that person? Why can't I have her life?

Other people are not the standard. What most people are doing in church is not the standard. The standard is what Christ said to Peter here twice – you follow me!

We used to sing a chorus "I have decided to follow Jesus". In the late 19th century, missionaries brought the gospel to Assam in northeast India, where the Garo people—once feared headhunters—resided. Among the first converts was a man named Nokseng, along with his wife and two children. Their public faith ignited a stir among the villagers, drawing many toward Christ. The village chief, threatened by this spiritual movement, summoned the family and demanded they

renounce their faith under penalty of death. With quiet resolve, Nokseng declared, "I have decided to follow Jesus."

The chief ordered the execution of his children. As they lay dying, the chief demanded again that he recant. Nokseng replied, "Though no one joins me, still I will follow." His wife was then killed. Finally, as death loomed, he confessed, "The cross before me, the world behind me. No turning back." He was executed moments later.

But his martyrdom bore fruit. The chief, pierced by the family's unwavering faith, asked, "What kind of God inspires such devotion?" In time, he too professed Christ, and many in the village followed. Nokseng's final words became a hymn first sung among the Garo people, and later around the world:

"I have decided to follow Jesus, no turning back, no turning back.

"Though no one join me, still I will follow, no turning back.

The world behind me the cross before, no turning back.

John then overturns a mistaken notion that had apparently developed because of this account: that Peter would die, but John would not, or that John would live to see the rapture.²³ Then this saying went out among the brethren that this disciple would not die. Yet Jesus did not say to him that he would not die, but, "If I will that he remain till I come, what *is that* to you?" (John 21:23)

And John tells us that it is he that wrote this Gospel, and that every word and incident in it is true, even though John could not contain all of them.

²⁴ This is the disciple who testifies of these things, and wrote these things; and we know that his testimony is true. ²⁵ And there are also many other things that Jesus did, which if they were written one by one, I suppose that even the world itself could not contain the books that would be written. Amen. (John 21:24–25)

But John finished his Gospel this way to show us that even among those who truly believe, there can be bad falls, bad setbacks. It doesn't mean the person was not saved, or that they lost their salvation. A true believer, like Peter, can end up in a ditch.

To get him out, dusted off and energised to become the Peter of Acts, Jesus reminded Peter of his full surrender, remitted Peter's sins as he confessed, and renewed Peter's single-minded faithfulness. First fervency, full forgiveness, focused faithfulness.
Lord, Warm my heart. Forgive my sins. Strengthen my steps.