

– 1 –

Following Jesus

One day as Jesus was standing by the Lake of Gennesaret, the people were crowding round him and listening to the word of God. He saw at the water's edge two boats, left there by the fishermen, who were washing their nets. He got into one of the boats, the one belonging to Simon, and asked him to put out a little from the shore. Then he sat down and taught the people from the boat.

When he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, 'Put out into deep water, and let down the nets for a catch.'

Simon answered, 'Master, we've worked hard all night and haven't caught anything. But because you say so, I will let down the nets.'

When they had done so, they caught such a large number of fish that their nets began to

Leaders Who Follow

break. So they signalled to their partners in the other boat to come and help them, and they came and filled both boats so full that they began to sink.

When Simon Peter saw this, he fell at Jesus' knees and said, 'Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man!' For he and all his companions were astonished at the catch of fish they had taken, and so were James and John, the sons of Zebedee, Simon's partners.

Then Jesus said to Simon, 'Don't be afraid; from now on you will fish for people.' So they pulled their boats up on shore, left everything and followed him (Luke 5:1–11).

True spiritual leadership doesn't start with leading, but with following. We have to follow Jesus before we can ever lead for Jesus. If we have any authority, influence or power, it is all derived from the Lord, and not inherent to us. Accordingly, every leader must continually return to Jesus, as a living, nourishing relationship with him is the foundation for all that we do.

Surprised by the power of Jesus

Thankfully, Scripture has given us a great example of a leader who has, in the midst of weakness and sins, lived out a life of following Jesus: Peter. His story is a demonstration of the power and grace of Jesus Christ to transform and

raise up an unlikely man to be a spiritual leader. In Luke 5:1–11, we meet Peter the fisherman, rather than Peter the apostle. As the story starts, we see that he has been out doing his job all night, but rather unsuccessfully. Through meeting Jesus, though, his life is about to be turned upside down and inside out. Jesus approaches Peter, gets into his boat and performs an amazing miracle. Beforehand, Peter's fishing had resulted only in empty nets. Now, through the power of Jesus, the nets become completely overloaded with wriggling fish. The shock is palpable.

Yet, while the catch is striking, it's not the most spectacular of Jesus' signs and wonders. After all, if Jesus really wanted to get attention, he could have done something much more breathtaking – such as parting the Sea of Galilee and walking through it! Further, in comparison with Jesus' other miracles, it isn't obviously altruistic. In other words, it's not a healing, a raising of the dead or an exorcism. So, while striking, it is in many ways also strange and inconsequential. We might ask ourselves, 'What's the point of this miracle?'

It seems that this sign is best understood as a personalised miracle for Simon. Fishing is, obviously, not a hobby for Peter, but his livelihood, and this is, by any standard, a dream catch for him. The irony with the miracle is that Peter, an experienced fisherman who knows the local waters, had caught nothing that day. Jesus, on the other hand, proves himself to be the best fisherman in Galilee for a hundred years – and without even having a fishing rod or getting

himself wet! Jesus is clearly getting Simon's attention here. He's showing Simon (and us) that he is the One who gives, or withdraws, ultimate success. It's all in his hands.

As a result, this changes our perspective on everything that we do in life or ministry. The reality is that while we can do everything that we might think of, using all our powers and gifts, and working all day and night, we might yet still come up with nothing. We need to know that our greatest effort to build our churches, our greatest dreams for ministry and our every success are all under the authority of Jesus. Our 'fishing' is submitted to his purpose and plan, and the filling of our nets is controlled by him. He's Lord over everything, and dwarves all our efforts and hard work. The Lord Jesus can choose to give us our dreams with a snap of his fingers, or withhold if that is best. Maybe he'll bless us with everything we desire, or maybe he won't, but the truth is that he decides.

Humbled before Jesus

We know that Peter respected Jesus before the miracle. After all, Jesus had already healed his mother-in-law (4:38–39), and Peter calls Jesus 'Master' (5:5) and follows Jesus' directions about his boat! Yet now, through this miracle, Peter is granted a whole new insight into who Jesus is, and it completely changes his life. Peter's words say it all: 'Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man!' (v. 8).

It doesn't seem that Peter is confessing a particular kind of sin here, but rather that he is recognising Jesus'

identity. In 4:34, an unclean spirit who Jesus is exorcising cries out in terror, 'Go away! What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are – the Holy One of God!' There is a striking echo of these words in Peter. Of course, unlike the spirit, Peter isn't fighting Jesus here, but he does fall before him in self-humiliation. The sign of the full net has pointed him to the ultimate power, glory and holiness of Jesus. He understands that he's in the presence of the Holy One.

Yet, the really striking thing in this story is what has led Peter into this confession. Notice that it isn't a rebuke from Jesus. There's no indication in the passage that Jesus has told him off, or confronted him about sin in his life. On the contrary, Peter's eyes have been opened by the generous power of Jesus through this sign. The Lord has shown him his goodness in this miracle, and it's that very goodness that has convicted Peter of his unworthiness. We might wonder how goodness could be so convicting, but one of C. S. Lewis's science fiction trilogy helps explain the power of infinite goodness. In this scene, the main character finds himself before a kind of angelic presence. The passage is remarkable for the way it describes what it's like to encounter true goodness:

My fear was now of another kind. I felt sure that the creature was what we call 'good', but I wasn't sure whether I liked 'goodness' so much as I had supposed. This is a very terrible experience. As long as what you are afraid of

Leaders Who Follow

is something evil, you may still hope that the good may come to your rescue. But suppose you struggle through to the good and find that it also is dreadful? How if food itself turns out to be the very thing you can't eat, and home the very place you can't live, and your very comforter the person who makes you uncomfortable? Then, indeed, there is no rescue possible: the last card has been played. For a second or two I was nearly in that condition. Here at last was a bit of that world from beyond the world, which I had always supposed that I loved and desired, breaking through and appearing to my senses: and I didn't like it, I wanted it to go away. I wanted every possible distance, gulf, curtain, blanket and barrier to be placed between it and me.¹

Peter has met the Lord and he's simply awestruck. Here we have a man who will become the great leader of the apostles, the preacher at Pentecost and a great miracle worker, but his starting point with Jesus is: 'Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man!' When did we last tremble before the wonderful love and goodness of the Lord Jesus? We too need our eyes opened once again to see his awe-inspiring generosity.

Appointed by Jesus

Peter finds himself overwhelmed and tells Jesus to leave him, but Jesus doesn't accede to Peter's request. He simply tells Peter not to be afraid (5:10). Of course, you only say

Following Jesus

that to someone if there is something that is potentially scary or threatening. When Jesus says this, he's not denying that he is almighty, holy and full of glory (all potentially scary things, as we've already seen!). Rather, he is declaring, 'I'm good and my intentions towards you are good.' Jesus has come to call Peter and appoint him to reach a lost world. Peter has just told Jesus to leave him, but now Peter is going to leave everything in order to follow Jesus (v. 11). Jesus' miraculous catch of fish will lead to Peter getting a whole new set of 'fishing skills' as he has his life turned upside down.

We have been summoned into ministry by an awesome and authoritative Lord. We tremble before him, but should not be afraid because he's wonderfully kind and good. Jesus has called us to leave civilian affairs behind (cf. 2 Tim. 2:4), and to give our lives to his service. Our purpose and goal is no longer set by our own predilections, but by his kingdom agenda. We now follow him.

Disowning Jesus

'Simon, Simon, Satan has asked to sift all of you as wheat. But I [Jesus] have prayed for you, Simon, that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned back, strengthen your brothers.'

But he replied, 'Lord, I am ready to go with you to prison and to death.'

Leaders Who Follow

Jesus answered, 'I tell you, Peter, before the cock crows today, you will deny three times that you know me' (Luke 22:31–34).

The call of Peter in Luke 5 looks very promising as his life finds a whole new direction and purpose. However, fast-forward to Luke 22, and the picture we get of Peter is a lot less favourable. His following of Jesus turns into its opposite: a disowning of Jesus. The Gospel doesn't pull its punches in describing him.

Jesus has given the disciples warning after warning about what is to happen, but they don't listen, or misunderstand. In the face of the cross, the disciples are filled with a silly status obsession and competitiveness (v. 24), and Peter himself boasts of how he's willing to die with Jesus (v. 33). His heart is soon exposed as he denies Jesus three times – initially, in front of a powerless slave girl. The tragic finale comes as Jesus himself looks at Peter in the moment of denial (v. 61), and he is left with bitter failure, guilt and tears.

At this point, we might expect the lesson of it all to be that we shouldn't be like Peter – and that is an important and true application of the story. We are indeed challenged here to live out a faithful discipleship in the face of testing circumstances (cf. 9:26). Yet, while we might think that it would be great not to resemble Peter, the fact is that he isn't the worst of believers, but the best. Peter actually tells us more about the tendencies of our hearts than we might like to think. While, then, the story can drive us to renewed

vigilance and determined faithfulness, it should, on a deeper level, humble us. Our following is always imperfect, and sometimes the best of us can end up falling into the worst things.

All through this chapter, the betrayal of Judas, and the unfaithfulness of Peter, go hand in hand. The actions of the two characters are interweaved and compared. They have both shared in the ministry of Jesus through preaching and performing miracles. And here, at the end, we see that both are proud (22:24), both repudiate Jesus (vv. 4, 57) and both are being influenced by Satan (vv. 3, 31). That should sober us in many ways. While we might naturally want to draw a very tight distinction between Judas and these other apostles, thinking that Judas' betrayal was about some distinctively awful character defect, the fact is that these men were not fundamentally different. The gospel narrative emphasises their similarities more than we might want to consider.

The real difference between Judas and Peter isn't found in their character as such, but in sovereign grace. In the mystery of God's election, Peter experiences the grace of God preserving him, while Judas is handed over to his sin. We see both salvation and reprobation at work here. Judas' betrayal isn't simply the expression of his own sin, but also the fulfilment of the divine plan (Luke 22:22; Matt. 27:9–10; John 13:18). Peter's preservation, on the other hand, is as much due to divine grace as Judas' betrayal is due to divine rejection. Jesus makes the reality of sovereign grace clear in his response to Peter's arrogant declaration

of faithfulness in Luke 22:33. Peter's denial is known and predicted. His hope, in the face of Satan's onslaught, won't be in his faithfulness, but in Jesus' faithful intercession for him. Peter won't uphold his own faith, but Jesus will do it for him. Jesus' words declare the certainty of preservation despite Peter's own unbelief and disobedience.

Our confidence in the robustness of our following is humbled here. There is much potential failure in us, but the grace of God and the intercession of Jesus are the foundations of our hope. Satan will sift us, too, and we shouldn't put much stock in our own zeal and faith to carry us through those seasons. We, too, must beware bold declarations of what we believe ourselves to be. Rather, our confidence is in Jesus' faithful preservation of us, instead of our faithful following of him. Sovereign grace undergirds all true discipleship.

Fishermen or fishers of men?

Afterwards Jesus appeared again to his disciples, by the Sea of Galilee. It happened this way: Simon Peter, Thomas (also known as Didymus), Nathanael from Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two other disciples were together. 'I'm going out to fish,' Simon Peter told them, and they said, 'We'll go with you.' So they went out and got into the boat, but that night they caught nothing.

Following Jesus

Early in the morning, Jesus stood on the shore, but the disciples did not realise that it was Jesus.

He called out to them, 'Friends, haven't you any fish?'

'No,' they answered.

He said, 'Throw your net on the right side of the boat and you will find some.' When they did, they were unable to haul the net in because of the large number of fish.

Then the disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, 'It is the Lord!' As soon as Simon Peter heard him say, 'It is the Lord,' he wrapped his outer garment round him (for he had taken it off) and jumped into the water. The other disciples followed in the boat, towing the net full of fish, for they were not far from shore, about a hundred metres. When they landed, they saw a fire of burning coals there with fish on it, and some bread.

Jesus said to them, 'Bring some of the fish you have just caught.' So Simon Peter climbed back into the boat and dragged the net ashore. It was full of large fish, 153, but even with so many the net was not torn. Jesus said to them, 'Come and have breakfast.' None of the disciples dared ask him, 'Who are you?' They knew it was the Lord. Jesus came, took the bread and

Leaders Who Follow

gave it to them, and did the same with the fish. This was now the third time Jesus appeared to his disciples after he was raised from the dead.

When they had finished eating, Jesus said to Simon Peter, 'Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?'

'Yes, Lord,' he said, 'you know that I love you.'

Jesus said, 'Feed my lambs.'

Again Jesus said, 'Simon son of John, do you love me?'

He answered, 'Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.'

Jesus said, 'Take care of my sheep.'

The third time he said to him, 'Simon son of John, do you love me?'

Peter was hurt because Jesus asked him the third time, 'Do you love me?' He said, 'Lord, you know all things; you know that I love you.'

Jesus said, 'Feed my sheep. Very truly I tell you, when you were younger you dressed yourself and went where you wanted; but when you are old you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go.' Jesus said this to indicate the kind of death by which Peter would glorify God. Then he said to him, 'Follow me!'

Peter turned and saw that the disciple whom Jesus loved was following them. (This was

Following Jesus

the one who had leaned back against Jesus at the supper and had said, 'Lord, who is going to betray you?') When Peter saw him, he asked, 'Lord, what about him?'

Jesus answered, 'If I want him to remain alive until I return, what is that to you? You must follow me.' Because of this, the rumour spread among the believers that this disciple would not die. But Jesus did not say that he would not die; he only said, 'If I want him to remain alive until I return, what is that to you?' (John 21:1–23).

John 21 is the fulfilment of Jesus' promise in Luke 22:31–32. Here we see, through the grace of Jesus, that Peter's failure in disowning him is not an ultimate failure. The context is important and obvious. The disciples' confusion, despair and disappointment in the face of the cross is gone as they have met the risen Jesus. Their hearts have, accordingly, been transformed from doubt and fear to joy. The Lord has breathed the Spirit upon them, commissioned them and sent them out in great authority (John 20:21–22).

There is, though, still more for the disciples, particularly Peter, to learn. The story now moves from the inner room in John 20 to the Sea of Galilee in John 21. The disciples are fishing (again). It is unclear to what extent this is to be seen negatively. On the one hand, this could be read as them drifting back to their old lives and sidelining the ministry that the risen Jesus had recently given them. Yet, on the

other hand, there isn't any rebuke here from Jesus for their fishing. The story, on balance, seems to be silent on this issue. Whatever their motives or intentions, Peter again finds himself on a rather unsuccessful fishing expedition. This is about more than old skills having become rusty in the intervening years! Here we have another divine intervention.

In verse 4, we read that the risen Jesus is there – though incognito. The disciples don't know it is him, creating the dramatic tension of the story. But Jesus calls out, rather ironically, 'Friends, haven't you any fish?' (v. 5). (It's hard to read this and think that Jesus has no sense of humour.) The question is, in a sense, superfluous as the Lord knows that they haven't caught anything – and he knows why. The disciples answer in the negative, maybe a tad defensively! Jesus then makes what, on the surface of things, seems like a rather ridiculous suggestion: to throw their nets over the right side.

Yet, despite its apparent stupidity, the disciples remarkably do what he asks. Do they have some inkling about him? Or maybe they just want to humble the smart Alec on the shore? Whatever the reason, the result is another fishing miracle. The nets become spectacularly full; in fact, so full that the disciples can't haul in all the fish. Of course, they could be forgiven here for thinking they were experiencing *déjà vu* because they were! Peter's initial encounter with Jesus is repeating itself. It becomes clear that these two fishing miracles function as bookends to the story of

Peter. John 21 should, accordingly, be viewed in light of Luke 5:1–11.²

Peter's betrayal and reinstatement now becomes the focus of the story. The repeated miracle is necessary because of what had happened at Jesus' arrest and trial. Peter had reneged on his personal commitment to his Lord, and so he needs to be recommissioned. Jesus is, once again, calling him from being a fisherman to becoming a fisher of men. Though Peter had seen the empty tomb and been with the risen Jesus, there is still more for him to know and learn. Notice that, in John 21, Peter had been fishing in the dark (v. 3), but with Jesus a new day comes (v. 12). Light is now dawning in Peter's darkness.

In reaction to the miracle, the disciples' eyes are opened ('It is the Lord!' v. 7). They see who this man on the shore is, and Peter, who had previously retreated from Jesus, now runs to him. Though tremendous, the catch of fish is insignificant. The sign fades into the background before the One to whom it is pointing. Peter leaves his boat and nets once again for Jesus. He is recovering his call to follow the Lord.

Stepping onto land, the disciples receive a gracious invitation from the risen Lord: 'Come and have breakfast' (v. 12). Here we see the first ever men's breakfast as the disciples enjoy Jesus' remarkable hospitality. There are echoes of feeding miracles as well as fishing miracles. We're told that there were 153 fish in the net (v. 11), which amounts to nineteen fish per person! The sheer amount of food points

to the Lord's remarkable abundance for his people. This was truly an 'all-you-can-eat' buffet with a large amount of leftovers. Jesus' gracious provision for them again is a reminder that he can give us more than we ever ask for or imagine (Eph. 3:20–21). Fishers of men will never lack ample supply for their own needs.

Do you love me?

In John 21:15–23, we come to Jesus' famous questions to Peter. Here the Lord's grace is wonderfully poured out over Peter's life as he is reinstated and recommissioned as a spiritual leader. Jesus fulfils the prediction he made in Luke 22:31–32. Three times the question 'do you love me?' is asked, paralleling Peter's three denials. His failure and sin have been plunged into the cross. What might have seemed impossible a short time earlier is now made possible: he will be restored to leadership. What an incredible conclusion to this story and what a hope for failed leaders! Nothing is impossible with the Lord. In our worst moments, and in our failures, the Lord Jesus can still come to us with restoring grace.

However, though this grace is fantastic, it isn't easy-going; there is discipline and challenge as well. Here the one who had been renamed Cephas/Peter ('the rock') is addressed by his original name, 'Simon son of Jonah' (v. 15). He clearly hasn't been the rock he had been called to be. Further, while the thrice-asked question is a reinstatement, it is also a reminder of his denial. The questions are, in other

words, piercing. They wound as well as comfort: ‘Peter was hurt because Jesus asked him the third time, “Do you love me?”’ (v. 17). There is tremendous grace, but it isn’t cheap. Thus, we see that the reinstatement of leaders after significant failure, even directly by the Lord Jesus, is not a simple process. On the one hand, significant failure doesn’t have to become ultimate failure, and yet, on the other hand, the covering of that failure is difficult. There is hope for us all, even while we are sobered by the realities of sin and grace.

The sobering realities of Peter’s reinstatement become clear in verses 18–19 as Jesus calls him to do the very thing that he had backed off from before: to die in service of his Lord. It’s a very moving and holy scene. Peter has just been asked three times, ‘do you love me?’ In John 15:13, Jesus had defined love as laying down our lives for our friends. That is exactly what Jesus has done, but it is exactly what Peter has not done. Peter will be called to show a love for Jesus by living out that pattern of self-sacrifice and death.

Alongside the thrice-asked question about love, Peter is commanded three times to do the work of a shepherd and care for the sheep. The image has a sobering background because, in John 10:11, Jesus has already defined what shepherding the flock really means: it too means laying down one’s life. Feeding the sheep and spiritual friendship aren’t then, as we might imagine, just about preparing a good sermon, but are about dying for those who are precious to the Lord. At the heart of all ministry – of any kind – is the sacrifice of oneself for others. Peter is told that the hands

that feed the lambs will be stretched out for Jesus in crucifixion. Just as Jesus had glorified the Father in his death (17:4), Peter will glorify God in his crucifixion (21:19). Reinstatement to leadership isn't about regaining position, power and privilege, but about being reinstated to follow our Lord in the way of the cross.

Following Jesus now sounds quite different to how it might have sounded in Luke 5:11 and John 1:43! It is actually all about following him all the way to the cross. While we might naturally feel that it would be amazing to meet the risen Jesus, when he asks us to do things like this, we might suddenly not feel so keen to meet him any more! This interaction with Peter makes it clear that there really isn't anything that the Lord Jesus can't ask us to do. Surely, Peter didn't sing, 'I love Jesus' quite so glibly after that, and neither should we.

His will, your story

As Peter ponders his future, his mind immediately goes to the other disciples, in particular the 'disciple whom Jesus loved' (21:20). Peter asks, 'Lord, what about him?' (v. 21). Jesus has outlined Peter's destiny, and the question that naturally arises is how much this will be a pattern for all disciples. Jesus' reply is both mysterious and corrective: 'Jesus answered, "If I want him to remain alive until I return, what is that to you? You must follow me"' (v. 22).

C. S. Lewis alludes to this scene in *The Horse and His Boy*, one his Narnia books. The heroes, a girl called Aravis and

Following Jesus

a boy called Shasta, are racing by horse to Narnia to save it from the nasty Calormenes. On the way, they are chased by a mysterious lion, who hounds them at every point. When they are almost there, the lion catches them and, rising up, tears at Aravis's shoulder with great strength. Aravis screams with her back now covered in blood. Later in the story, they meet Aslan the lion, the guardian of Narnia. Aslan tells Shasta that he was the one who badly hurt Aravis. Shasta's natural shock leads him to ask why on earth Aslan would do such a thing? Wasn't he meant to be on their side?! Aslan's reply is very instructive for our passage: 'Child, I am telling you your story, not hers. I tell no one any story but his own.'³

Jesus is Lord, and he is in charge. He doesn't tell us what someone else will do, and that's not our concern. They are, after all, his servants and not ours. What matters is whether or not we will follow Jesus in what he has laid out for us. Maybe the Lord will give others a comfortable and easy life, and send us on a difficult path. Or maybe he won't. It is simply up to him. Given this, we can be tempted to make rules for others according to what the Lord has called us to do. We can want others to give up what we have given up, and call others to suffer as we have suffered. Yet, we must resist this and simply concern ourselves with the story to which the Lord has called us. Whatever we must face, Jesus says, 'You must follow me' (v. 22). Let's take up our crosses and do that.