

“The End of Death: How Jesus Rose to Call You to Follow Him”

John 21:15–19

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September 17, 2023 • Sunday Morning Sermon

I love this church, the people and the ministry to which God has given you to steward. Thank you for doing it so well. Glory be to the Father. I am a son of Covenant Presbyterian Church, but I often think of myself because of the particular influence of the pastoral staff here on my life, as an adopted son of Briarwood. The two senior pastors (Frank Barker and Harry Reeder) that you have been blessed with have left an indelible mark of God's grace in my life and so because of your partnership in the Gospel, your kindness to me, your grace and love in Jesus Christ, I'd like to speak to you all as family.

As for a family update I'll tell you what the Lord has been doing in our lives. My family and I planted Cahaba Park Church (PCA) in September of 2007, and I served there for as senior pastor for 15 years. Had no plans whatsoever to leave there, but God had other plans. In His parade of Providence led me and my family to Mission to North America. MNA is our denomination's National Mission committee, which oversees church planting and church vitality in the United States and Canada. It was our privilege to set forth the Assembly a vision of seeing the PCA, one of only two denominations nationwide that is seeing growth over the past 25 years, a vision to see that our denomination grow by 50% in ten years. Only God can do that. Amen.

I want you to think with me, if we take our past statistics that's given to us each year at General Assembly and apply that kind of growth, we might see half a million conversions in ten years across the country. Praise God. Why do I tell you this now? It is because many of you have had interaction with about what aspect of that vision does Briarwood and you want to own. And in this passage in particular, John 21:15-19, the main idea is that because Jesus rose from the dead, He calls us all to follow Him.

Before we look at this passage, I want you to go with me in your mind, to a hospital room. The room is sparsened, bare, sterile. On the simple bed lies a woman somewhat pale in a hospital gown wearing a blue baseball cap. The hat covers the effect of the treatment for her disease. The opening scene of this movie *Wit*, has the woman looking directly above, and you're looking directly down into her eyes that seem to peer into your heart. Emma Thompson plays the role of Vivian Bearing, once an English professor renowned in her field, now reduced to the current state. The film follows her journey of the progression of the disease and the loneliness that accompanies it. She as a professor, was cold and austere, and her physician, Dr. Kelekian, is similar – cold and calculating in his experimental chemotherapy. As you watch the film, there is just this sense of loneliness. She has no family; she has no friends. It's more than just loneliness. There's a sense of purposelessness, helplessness.

In this passage from John 21, we meet someone else who has cancer, not the physical kind of cancer, but spiritual cancer. His name is Peter, and that spiritual cancer is called sin. Once, at the height of his discipleship, I don't know if that's even a thing, this man 12 hours earlier than when this passage takes place, denied Jesus three times. He has a sense of how can I possibly be used by God now. I wonder if any of you feel that way. If you do, let's find hope in God's Word. This is God's Word.

John 21:15-19 says [15] *When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, “Simon, son of John, 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 a second*

time, "Simon, son of John, 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 John, 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 everything; You know that I love You." Jesus said to him, "Feed My sheep. [18] Truly, truly, I say to you, when you were young, you used to dress yourself and walk wherever you wanted, but when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and another will dress you and carry you where you do not want to go." [19] (This He said to show by what kind of death he was to glorify God.) And after saying this He said to him, "Follow Me."

Prayer:

Heavenly Father, we pray that this Your holy Word, would take root in our hearts, showing us our sin and showing us our Savior. We pray this in Jesus' Name, Amen.

This passage gives us a main idea because Jesus raised from the dead calls us to follow Him, but it opens with this problem right at the outset. The problem is that Peter and us are full of sin and it's taken until now for Peter to really see it for what it is. Jesus begins to uncover it when He asked him the question in John 21:15, Jesus said to Simon Peter "Simon, son of John, do you love Me more than these?" Why would Jesus need to ask Peter that question? In this passage, John doesn't tell us, but Luke gives us the detail.

Luke 22:54-62 says, [54] *Then they seized Him and led Him away, bringing Him into the high priest's house, and Peter was following at a distance. [55] And when they had kindled a fire in the middle of the courtyard and sat down together, Peter sat down among them. [56] Then a servant girl, seeing him as he sat in the light and looking closely at him, said, "This man also was with Him." [57] But he denied it, saying, "Woman, I do not know Him." [58] And a little later someone else saw him and said, "You also are one of them." But Peter said, "Man, I am not." [59] And after an interval of about an hour still another insisted, saying, "Certainly this man also was with Him, for he too is a Galilean." [60] But Peter said, "Man, I do not know what you are talking about." And immediately, while he was still speaking, the rooster crowed. [61] And the Lord turned and looked at Peter. And Peter remembered the saying of the Lord, how He had said to him, "Before the rooster crows today, you will deny me three times." [62] And he went out and wept bitterly.*

When Jesus asked Peter in John 21:15 'Do you love Me more than these?' He's exposing the problem of sin in Peter's heart. Now you have to just remember, right? I think Peter was the best disciple by worldly standards. When Jesus said to His disciples, "All of you are going to deny Me" Peter said, "No, not me. I won't deny you, Lord. No way." It was Peter that gave the best answer when Jesus says, "Who do people say that I am?" Peter, remembering his Sunday school lessons, said 'You are the Christ, the Son of God.' And Jesus said to him, "Blessed are you Simon Bar Jonah, for flesh and blood, did not reveal this to you, but My Father who is in heaven. And I say to you that you are Peter and on this rock I will build My church" (Matthew 16:16-18) Peter says, 'Yes' and Jesus says, "Before the rooster crows, you're going to not deny Me three times." No way. Imagine how Peter must have felt. My sin is really that deep? Oh, it's deeper still.

What's our problem that we share in common with Peter? We're sinners. As I served as the senior pastor of Cahaba Park, one of the most common questions that people out of town would ask me was, "what's it like pastoring a church in your hometown?" One of my favorite answers was, "the applications of the sermon are pretty easy." 'Why?' "Well, because they're sins are my sins, their idols are my idols." What are our idols? Did you know, Birmingham

competes with Chattanooga, but I think we have them edged out year after year for 51% of the population says that they believe the Bible is true. That makes us the most Christian city in the world. So, it's really easy to say, 'the problem in here is not with me. It's not with the people who sit on my pew. It's not with our church or our denomination. It's them. Look at them.' That's what Peter said, "It's not me. I'm not going to deny You, Lord. Remember, I'm the one that gave the right answer." But the Lord says, 'Do you love Me?' Peter's sin runs far deeper. Our sin runs far deeper than we're really even comfortable even imagining. That's the problem.

What's the solution? The solution is that only Jesus, by His death and resurrection, can root out that which we cannot. On that rocky sandy shore of John 21, a certain smell takes him back to that night. It's funny, isn't it, how smells do that. The scent of pine trees will always remind me of my wedding day. We were married at an outdoor chapel at a nearby lake, and that day that was particularly breezy and the breeze seemed to stir up the sweet, sappy pine scent in the air, such that whenever I smelled pine trees, it always reminds me of my wedding day.

Here it's that acrid, not so sweet, smoky smell of a charcoal fire that takes Peter back to that night of Luke 22, after he had denied Him three times with that smoky smell in the air, the text tells us, 'and Jesus looked at him.' Now we read that and we interpret it the way that we might respond to someone when they betray us three times – with disgust or sadness or even anger. But if Jesus did that, we wouldn't have John 21. Although we're not told, I think the look that Jesus gave him said something like, "My child, you have no concept how deep your sin runs. I know you said you thought you would never betray Me, but I came precisely because you would. It is your sin that actually compels Me to come and it is for your sin that I will hang on a cross and bear the full weight of God's wrath, drinking it all the way to the dregs so that you might not be disqualified for service." We know the next day Jesus did in fact hang on the cross and rose from the dead.

Here we have these three questions. "Simon, son of Jonah, do you love me more than *these*?" Commentators go back and forth about the what the "these" is. Some say that these is, 'do you love Me more than these disciples love Me,' like Jesus is asking him to judge his love relative to the other disciples. Other commentators say, 'Do you love me more than *these* fish?' I think what's going on here is Jesus is saying, 'Do you love me more than all this?' What's the all this – your friends, your family, the fish. You might think 'the fish?' Remember, they've just hauled in a retirement amount of fish. You could interpret it as comfort or security. Do you love Me? He asked three questions three times he was forgiven. The solution is Jesus paid for the sin that Peter could not and Peter is commissioned for service because Jesus paid for it.

Here is the application for us. Our sin is so deep, but our Savior's love is so great and it is precisely because of our sin, our rebellion from Him, when we were running away from Him that God sent His Son. His heart warms towards us in our rebellion because it draws His love out even more. He rescues us and says to us, "Follow Me." So, we have the problem, the solution and the call. The call is made plain here in John 21:18-19 which says [18] *Truly, truly, I say to you, when you were young, you used to dress yourself and walk wherever you wanted, but when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and another will dress you and carry you where you do not want to go.* [19] *(This He said to show by what kind of death he was to glorify God.) And after saying this He said to him, "Follow Me."*

Once Peter thought himself so useless, so helpless, of no utter use in the Kingdom of God, found the solution in Jesus Christ, and Jesus Christ commissioned him for service, saying, 'You're going to follow Me and as you follow Me, you'll proclaim My name and suffer for My

name.’ So following Jesus Christ means that there's this double part of proclaiming Christ while suffering for Christ. What might it mean for us to proclaim Christ to our neighbors?

I will commend to you a recent book that came out in August 2023, titled *The Great Dechurching*. It's a scholarly work, which is a result of peer reviewed journal articles and so forth, but it articulates that America is in the greatest and fastest religious shift and decline in our nation's history. More people have left the church over the last 25 years than all of the people that came to faith in Christ in the first Great Awakening, the second Great Awakening, and the Billy Graham Crusades combined. And 85% of those who have left the church would say they would come again if a friend invited them. It's not so simple. I don't know. Maybe it's not just re-inviting someone. Maybe it's sharing Christ for perhaps the first time with someone who's in deep pain that has responded to you in a really ugly way. The reason that people respond in ugly ways that surprises us is because it comes out of pain.

The Gospel is a balm to that pain. We have the answer. We have the solution in Jesus. Or maybe it's for you as a student standing up and doing what you know is right, even in the face of wrong, even if it makes you lonely. Jesus says, “If you're going to follow Me, you have to proclaim Me and sometimes it's going to cause suffering and pain.” We're also promised that there will be an end to that suffering and pain. It's given to us right here. The hope of the resurrection is given to us right here in parentheses in John 21:19a; [19] (*This He said to show by what kind of death he was to glorify God.*)

How in the world is our death, Peter's death in this case, meant to glorify God? It is because God has forever defeated sin and death as an enemy, so that the only thing that death does is bring believers into the presence of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Hallelujah. So, the only thing that hits us when we die is the shadow of death, taking us to the presence of a Friend that sticks closer than a brother so that we need not fear even the greatest suffering. Because one day death will be no more and we will be forever with Him.

Though the movie *Wit*, which I talked about at the beginning of this study, is not a Christian movie, and though Vivian Bearing is not a believer, nor is Dr. Kelekian, the sonnets of John Donne, which Vivien Baring is an expert in English literature, are thoroughly Christian. There is this one scene in the movie that describes an interaction between Professor Evelyn Ashford and Vivian Bearing. Vivian is still a graduate student at the time, studying the sonnets of John Donne, learning how to translate them or which translation is best and Evelyn Ashford is the leading expert in her field. So, she is training young Bearing. This is what one interaction as Vivian reflects in her aloneness. This is one interaction in Professor Ashford's office that she recalls.

She says to Evelyn as she corrects her interpretation of John Donne's sonnet *Death Be Not Proud*; “Do you think that the punctuation of the last line of this sonnet is merely an insignificant detail? The sonnet begins with a valiant struggle with death, calling on all the forces of intellect and drama to vanquish the enemy. But it is ultimately about overcoming the seemingly insuperable barriers separating life, death and eternal life. In the edition you (Vivian) chose to translate edition, you chose this profoundly simple meaning is sacrificed to hysterical punctuation and death capital D shall be no more; death, capital D, ‘thou shall die!’ Well, if you go in for this sort of thing, I suggest you take up Shakespeare.” She then corrects her punctuation, offering an alternative explanation and she reads this way; And death shall be no more, death thou shall die. Nothing but a breath, a comma separates life from life everlasting. Very simple, really, she says, with the original punctuation restored, death is no longer

something to act out on a stage with an exclamation mark for it as a comma, a pause, not insuperable barriers, not semicolons, just a comma.

So, it is also for the Christian. You see, God calls us to follow Him, and following Him means reckoning with our sin through our Savior, proclaiming Christ and suffering for Christ, but also promising that at one day, at long last, all of our suffering will come to an end and we will reign forever with Him because He wins then we win. As John Donne writes,

*Death, be not proud, though some have called thee*

*Mighty and dreadful, for thou art not so;...*

*One short sleep past, we wake eternally*

*And death shall be no more; Death, thou shalt die.*

Prayer:

Heavenly Father, we thank You for this Your Word. We thank You that John, 21, is in our Bibles, because without John 21, we, like Peter, would feel utterly helpless and purposeless because of our sin. But You O Lord, have provided the solution that only You can provide and so we pray that as we follow You, we would proclaim You and suffer well for You, knowing that one day You will call us to be safely home and we pray this in Jesus' Name, Amen.