

# CROSSROADS (EASTER 2020): CHRIST PREPARED

(John 21)

4.19.20

## INTRODUCTION

I have decided to extend our Easter celebration a bit this year. I realized there are a couple of amazing moments in biblical history that really are a part of the whole, wondrous narrative of Christ's victory over sin, death and Satan, so it is only fitting that they be included in this series. Next week we'll be looking at Christ's triumphant return to heaven, what we call the "ascension" and, the week after, we'll be looking at the coming of the promised Holy Spirit on Pentecost Sunday as told by Luke in Acts 2.

But between those two incredible events is a 40-day period of time that is just as wonderful, and so very important for a devoted group of followers who needed to be prepared for the tasks that lay ahead. So, let's look at that rich piece of preparation now.

## SETTING THE 40-DAY STAGE:

Now, by way of introduction, the greatest, most amazing thing had happened to Jesus following His death on the cross: He didn't stay dead. Instead, He began appearing - not as a ghost or spirit of some kind, but as a living, breathing, tangible, touchable person. The first one to see Him was Mary Magdalene, one of a group of women who had followed Christ from Galilee to Jerusalem. Then there were a few other women, then a couple of guys walking toward the village of Emmaus, also Peter (at some point in that day) - and then His appearance to almost all the disciples at one time. He was indeed gloriously alive - still recognizable but looking like He had just walked out of heaven instead of a tomb.

But His sudden appearance to His disciples, coming right into their presence in a completely locked, secured room, particularly after all the traumatic events of the past few days, made them unsure as to whether they could even trust their own senses. Could this be fatigue, or hysteria, or maybe even a ghost? Luke says that Christ's appearance both startled and frightened them. But as they stared at Him, unsure what to do or what to say, He told them: ***"Why are you troubled, and why do doubts rise in your minds? Look at My hands and My feet. It is I Myself! Touch Me and see; a ghost does not have flesh and bones, as you see I have"*** - ***Jesus Christ, Luke 24:38-39***. And sure enough, He still bore the marks memorializing the horrors of the cross. And, just in case they still weren't believing, Luke recorded that: ***[W]hile they still did not believe it because of joy and amazement, He asked them, "Do you have anything here to eat?" They gave Him a piece of broiled fish, and He took it and ate it in their presence - Luke 24:41-43***. And a week later, Jesus would reappear to all of them - this time also including the disciple Thomas - to confirm that He really was risen from the dead and, beyond that, that He was truly their Lord and their God!

Eventually, by Paul's account in I Corinthians 15, Jesus appeared to a gathering of over 500 of the brothers and sisters - all seeing the same thing at the same time: Jesus of Nazareth, alive and well. Can you imagine what must have been flying through their minds? Many of them had seen Jesus at His crucifixion - the blood flowing from His head to His feet. They had heard the cruel, insulting things that people were saying as they walked in front of Him; as Mark wrote: ***Those who passed by hurled insults at Him, shaking their heads and saying, "So! You who are going to destroy the temple and build it in three days, come down from the cross and save Yourself!" In the same way the chief priests and the teachers of the law mocked Him among themselves. "He saved others," they said, "but He can't save Himself! Let this Messiah, this king of Israel, come down now from the cross, that we may see and believe"*** - ***Mark 15:29-32a***.

What must have made those insults doubly difficult to hear was that, in a sense, they were right; at least, it seemed like it. Many of them had witnessed Jesus' amazing power, including what seemed to be His power even over death - the widow's son in Nain, Lazarus of Bethany, and so many countless others. If He had brought all those people back to life, why in the world was He letting these crude Roman spikes hold Him? Why did He seem so helpless? Why didn't He just ***come down now from the cross*** and make His enemies eat their hate-filled words? But no; He remained in place - for nine agonizing hours He remained in place. And then, with the

words, **"It is finished"** - **Jesus Christ, John 19:30a**, they had seen His head drop down on His chest. And if they didn't believe He was dead then, one of the soldiers onsite at the cross speared Him in His side, and the blood and fluid that poured out of that hideous wound told everybody that Jesus of Nazareth was no longer alive.

Some of them had then watched as Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus had hurriedly laid the body of Jesus on a linen cloth, quickly administered some spices, and wrapped Him within some additional linen strips. And then they had carried Him to a tomb that was in fact owned by Joseph; some had seen them carry Jesus in, but then those two had left - carrying nothing out. Jesus of Nazareth, who had redefined spiritual life for so many, and had miraculously even given physical life to many as well, lay completely without life in a tomb - sealed and guarded to ensure His dead presence.

Had they misjudged what Jesus of Nazareth was all about? Had they somehow misunderstood the meaning of His words? After all, much of what He had said seemed to indicate His belonging to God even as a son belongs to his father. That would make Him God but, if that was true, how could God die? It was a terrible, tragic, overwhelmingly sad mystery. So what were they supposed to do now, now that so many things seemed over and done with - pretend that it all never happened, like some kind of dream? Are you kidding me? But with nothing but a dead body inside a sealed tomb, apparently they were on their own to try and figure it all out, and then to get back to whatever their lives had been before.

But no! The cross had not been the end. Jesus of Nazareth was alive - which meant only one thing. Because He had been undeniably dead, them seeing Him now meant that He was undeniably God! This was no longer just following a rabbi; this was surrendering to the King of kings and Lord of lords! As He Himself had said to His disciples just before Gethsemane: **"Anyone who has seen Me has seen the Father"** - **Jesus Christ, John 14:9b**. And now, beyond a shadow of a doubt, they knew they had.

We also know that, right before Gethsemane, Jesus had given the disciples advanced notice that He would, in fact, soon be leaving them - not permanently, not forever but for sure - and, while His crucifixion was just around the corner, so to speak, that's not the leaving He was talking about. Every time Jesus had talked about His upcoming death, He had also talked about His upcoming resurrection as well. No, this leaving would be different but, just as with His death not being an end, so His leaving them would also not be an end but rather, a new beginning: **"I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you. . . . I did not tell you this from the beginning because I was with you, but now I am going to Him who sent me.... But very truly I tell you, it is for your good that I am going away. Unless I go away, the Advocate will not come to you; but if I go, I will send Him to you. ... [T]he Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you. I have told you now before it happens, so that when it does happen you will believe"** - **Jesus Christ, John 14:16, 18a; 16:4b-5a, 7; 14:26, 29**.

Now, we know that, from the moment Christ exited His tomb, He remained on planet Earth for 40 more days - just under six weeks. This time was necessary: Just as the disciples had not understood His death, so they would struggle with His leaving. And, ready or not, Christ was planning to build something called His "church," and they were going to be a part of that. So, there was prep work to do to get them ready in the very little time He had left.

Now while very little of actual moment-to-moment conversations and teachings have been preserved for us these 2,000 years later, we do know (or can ascertain) some things that did occur - things that do so much to inform us as to how to proceed with our lives both in Christ and in the ministry of His church, just like it informed those first disciples.

- 1) There's a possibility that it was during this time that what we have come to know as the "Great Commission," which we read in Matthew 28:18-20, was shared by Christ. And it is also possible that these "marching orders" of Christ were shared not just with the 11 remaining disciples, but

possibly with the 500 followers that Paul references in I Corinthians 15.

- 2) We can get a good sense of what Christ was teaching during this time because it likely reflects in the sermons we find in the book of Acts, and in the writings of Peter and John, as well as the writings of James. In addition, following his conversion, Paul eventually traveled to Jerusalem, as he relates in Galatians 1, during which he spent time with Peter and James, likely hearing from Christ's teachings during this time as well.

But for all of what may have happened, our focus today is on a critical conversation that took place between Jesus and Peter, so let's look at that moment now.

## TEXTS

First, as Jesus Himself had promised, and as the angels at the resurrection tomb had confirmed, Jesus would meet the disciples in Galilee. That meeting occurred at the beginning of John 21:

Seven of the disciples, while waiting in Galilee, decided to go fishing. They were out all night but caught nothing. Then, as John tells us: *Early in the morning, Jesus stood on the shore, but the disciples did not realize 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 - John 21:4-6.* Remembering that this had happened once before (Luke 5), John leaned over to Peter and said, "That guy on shore? It's the Lord!" And when the disciples eventually hauled the boat and the catch of fish to shore, there they found Jesus - the third time following His resurrection He had revealed Himself to them - with a fire, already cooking up some fish. Again, Jesus showed His servant's heart, even as their resurrected Lord and Savior! And think of it: a lakeshore breakfast of fish and bread, cooked up by the Creator Himself! Can you imagine a breakfast that ever tasted better!

Now following breakfast, Jesus went about the task of restoring Peter into ministry. Obviously, Jesus had big plans for this thing He called *my church* - and Peter was going to play an important role. After all, Peter had been the one disciple who had declared without flinching who Jesus truly was: *"You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God"-Peter, Matthew 16:16.*

But then, while eating the Passover meal in the upper room, Jesus had stunned the disciples by telling them that one in their number was going to betray Him. While everyone else was cautiously, even fearfully asking, "Lord, is it I?" Peter had very loud and proud bragged in front of everybody that, no matter what anybody else did, he would never fail Jesus: *"Even if I have to die with you, I will never disown you" - Matthew 26:35a.* He sounded so sure of himself.

But despite that bravado, after Christ's arrest, when Peter was confronted about being an associate of Jesus, he denied three times to even knowing Him, angrily cursing those who even suggested such a thing. And the man who just a few short hours before had so proudly paraded his courage wound up running away that night, weeping bitterly at his failure. The Greek tells us that this would have been a loud, almost violent wailing of agony. Peter was virtually destroyed by what he had done.

Now of course it wasn't like Peter was the only disciple who had turned into a dumpster fire that night. The truth is all the disciples needed some "rehab" regarding their relationship with Jesus. After all, as Matthew and Mark tell us: *[A]ll the disciples deserted [Christ] and fled - Matthew 26:56b.* But Jesus in His amazing grace had recognized the need to restore their relationship with Him. Both Luke and John record that Jesus' first words when He appeared to His disciples in their locked, secured room was, *"Peace be with you"-Luke 24:36b, John 20:19b.* In the Greek, Jesus is essentially bestowing His "every good wish" on the disciples - meaning no anger, no recrimination, but only His best for them. What a comfort that must have been! They had ignored and/or forgotten His words, deserted Him in His time of greatest need and, the first time He sees them, He greets them by expressing His fondest hopes for them.

At the same time, Jesus understood that Peter needed some special, individual attention. Among other things, Jesus had church leadership as one of His plans for Peter. But because Peter had failed

acknowledging Jesus three times, Jesus chose to take him through a process of three questions with an aim of complete and total restoration - by asking him three times: "Do you love me?" And, because his denials had been public, it is very likely the other disciples present at this time heard this post-breakfast conversation. So here we go!

***When they had finished eating, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon son of John, do you truly love Me more than these?" "Yes, Lord," he said, "you know that I love you." Jesus said, "Feed My lambs" - John 21:15.***

So, what was Jesus up to? With these questions, He is pushing Peter, and the other disciples and, by extension, us, to honestly evaluate the depths of our declared allegiance to Christ. One way He is doing this is by addressing him as Simon, the name he was known by before his following Jesus. When Jesus initially gave him this name, it was appropriate; Peter had just declared without hesitation who Jesus of Nazareth really was. As a response, Jesus changed his name from "Simon" to "Peter." It was an appropriate name: the Greek "petros" means "a piece of rock." A piece of rock, no matter how small, is considered unbreakable. But, as he had proved so quickly in denying Jesus, he was no "Peter"; he was no "rock," or stone or pebble either. That wasn't a judgment on Christ's part; that was a cold hard fact. Peter in denying Christ had betrayed his own name as well. Peter had broken; in fact, Peter had completely come apart. So, Jesus started these questions by taking him back to a time of life before he met Jesus.

Our English word "love" communicates poorly what's going on here because the same word is used from both Jesus and Peter. However, in the Greek, two totally different words are used, creating a very different picture. Why is that important?

- 1) When Jesus is asking Peter, "Do you truly love Me?" He is using the word *agapao* (*ag-ap-ah*"-o), a word that signifies a choice of total commitment, therefore a love that is unconditional and without limits, a self-sacrificing love - the love that Jesus showed - and a love given regardless of response.
- 2) When Peter replies, "You know that I love You," he uses a different word for love - *phileo* (*fil-eh*"-o) - that signifies a human affection one to another. Peter saying "love" is not the love of total commitment that Christ is asking of him. In other words, they are not saying the same thing: Jesus asks, "Do you love completely, unconditionally me?" Peter answers, "I love you as a friend."
- 3) Christ's question, "Do you truly love Me more than these?" likely refers to Peter's bragging self-confidence of his loving Jesus more than the other disciples - regardless of the circumstances. But it's a comparative question: Do you love me more than they do? It recognizes that Peter does have a love for Christ, but it takes away his arrogance, and gently reminds him of the recent past, and a relationship so easily dismissed.

Christ's immediate response, "Feed My lambs," refers to the constant and continual feeding and nourishing necessary for the lambs of the flock - those just beginning new life. It means providing the most fundamental, basic "bread of life" to believers just starting out - teaching the truths of the kingdom, and teaching those truths in a never-ending, ongoing basis.

And then, the repeated question: ***Again Jesus said, "Simon son of John, do you truly love Me?" He answered, "Yes, Lord, you know that I love You." Jesus said, "Take care of My sheep"-John 21:16.***

The different words for "love" occur here as well. Again, they are not talking about the same thing. With this particular question, however, Jesus moves from the "more than these" of Peter in comparison to any other people and put the focus squarely on Him: "Peter, forget everyone else and everything else. Do you love me?" He moves Peter away from the temptation to compare himself with others to answering for himself about himself. One problem: Peter's still not getting it; he is still stuck on *phileo* - friend love, limited love, measured love.

Christ's response, "Take care of My sheep," is sometimes translated as "tend," and refers to the other necessity for a shepherd after feeding the lambs - helping them grow by guiding them, leading the sheep as Christ on an ongoing basis with a responsibility that is never completed.

And then one final time: ***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 - John 21:17.***

This time Jesus uses the same word for "love" that Peter is using. In other words, Christ is saying, "Do you love Me even as much as you say you do?" Christ is directly challenging Peter to consider his own love in response to Christ's love, basically asking him, "Are you even My friend?" Christ is looking for an answer that Peter thus far has not given. Peter's hurt: this whole conversation is causing him grief. But what's "grieving" him? He's being confronted by a very awkwardly difficult question: "Are you even my friend?" Jesus has good reason for phrasing His question this way. Peter denied being His friend in betraying Him, denied even knowing Him. What's his position now - now that he sees Christ resurrected, knowing for sure that He is who He said He is? Have his interests changed? Have his feelings changed? Is he any different than he was before Jesus walked out of the tomb?

But in the midst of what must seem to Peter like some sort of a puzzling game, there are two incredible affirmations going on here:

- 1) First, Peter denied Christ three times, and now Christ is challenging him three times - not for rebuke but as a way of getting him to understand that, in Christ's eyes, being a leader is an extension of being a disciple. He is letting Peter know His desire for him to be that leader and that disciple, but Peter's overwhelming motivation must be his total, unconditional and undeniable love for his Lord- nothing half-hearted, no riding the fences. "What's your answer, Peter?" These questions are not just for that moment in time but for everything that is soon to follow.
- 2) Second, notice that, following each of Peter's answers, Jesus tells him something that must be done: (1) Feed My lambs, (2) Take care of My sheep, (3) Feed My sheep. He's declaring the sacred tasks that He is looking to Peter, along with the rest of the disciples, to accomplish. Peter is affirmed, not only in Christ's heart, but also in Christ's plans.

**BOTTOM LINE:** Jesus is trying to get Peter to understand that Jesus gave His all for Peter - very literally laying down His life for him. It was a servant's life, a completely selfless life. Jesus' love was not superficial; it loved completely regardless of cost because the outcome of that love outweighed the cost of that love. Could Peter's "affection" or "love as a friend" say the same thing?

That's an incredibly important consideration. Very shortly, as the church begins, trials, tribulations and persecutions will bring circumstances that will cause many - leaders and lay people alike - to have to choose, either to love Jesus Christ carefully, within limits, or love Him unconditionally, without limits. As a leader of the church, Peter is going to have to live out what Christ is asking him to show.

## **APPLICATION**

There are really only one takeaway from this moment, and it's this:

Jesus Himself modeled the answer that He was looking for from Peter - a complete and totally dedicated, unconditional love - love with no limits. Jesus qualifies as the model because He lived it. Jesus Himself first declared Himself that model during the Upper Room discourse: ***I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you. ... As I have loved you, so you must love one another - Jesus Christ, John 13:15, 34b.*** And it's Peter's fellow disciple John who confirms what that model looks like: ***This is how we know we are in Him: Whoever claims to live in Him must walk as Jesus did - I John 2:5b-6.***

But Jesus is also challenging Peter with a very distinct spiritual confrontation. You see, in this story, we have Jesus bringing Peter face-to-face with what he thought was sufficiently expressed love for Christ - but Jesus looks at him and says, "No; that's not enough." He already knows where Peter is at; what He

wants is for Peter to see for himself where he is at, compare it to Christ, and be confronted with the difference. That would not be comfortable - confrontation never is - but, for all that Christ has in mind for Peter and his future ministry, this confrontation is an absolute necessity - making Peter's comfort Christ's last consideration.

This is a serious issue. So much of Christianity in our day is based on the idea of comfort - comfort zones so stubbornly clung to. The desire for comfort or safety or familiarity or political correctness or social politeness too often overrules the desires of Scripture. But try and find one time that Jesus Christ ever described being His disciple in terms of comfort. Instead, what did Jesus talk about? Insults, persecution, lies, even death - all on account of bearing the name of Jesus.

Peter is having an extremely uncomfortable moment here. Christ knows the truth, and He pokes and prods Peter to see it, too. Seeing the truth in ourselves is almost never comfortable, but it is always necessary. And Christ is guaranteed going to do whatever is necessary to get us to face the truth - not as we see it but as He sees it. He has plans for us, and a purpose for our being here - and therein is the life of joy He wants us to claim. But to accomplish those plans and purposes (and to know that joy), we need to see the truth as to how much we love **Him** - and that is almost always confrontation because He is trying to get us to see something we don't want to see because He wants to get us to do something we don't want to do.

Rest assured; just like Peter, He will confront us - and the last thing that is in this world is comfortable.

Just like with Peter, our ministry for Christ is a direct reflection of our love for Christ - and He will do whatever is necessary to make our love for Him as perfect and complete as it can be. His goal is not confrontation for its own sake, but confrontation that changes us - to make us stronger, more sure believers, and to make us more unconditional servants of our Master. That is an ongoing and never-ending process, generated for the benefit of our relationship and our ministry, and it is that process that so brilliantly reduces all the truths and teachings of the Bible into one simple word: "follow." It is not comfortable to "deny ourselves, pick up our cross and follow Christ." It is not comfortable to let the outcome of following outweigh the cost of following. Jesus Himself showed us how costly following God's plans can be -**but** He also showed us, in the final analysis, how absolutely joyous following God's plans can be.

It's all about following our Master, but it is impossible for us to follow Him the way He wants unless we are loving Him the way He wants - and He will show us what's getting in the way, whatever that is - and then it will be the next thing, and the next, and the next. He will never not show us what's getting in the way. Is that uncomfortable? Sure. It's always uncomfortable being re-created to fit into someone else's ideas. Why? That means surrender- complete, total, unconditional, without limits. Kinda sounds like the love He seeks, doesn't it? But when it's Jesus Christ who's re-creating us, that's where the joy is, that's where the love He's looking for is - and that's where the blessing is.

## **CONCLUSION**

When we say, "I love Jesus," what are we saying? We know what Jesus is saying; not only did He say it a lot but, on the cross, He showed what His love looked like. Jesus was challenging Peter the same way: "You say you love Me, Peter. What does your love look like?"

That's God's question to us. Do you love Jesus? What does that love look like? And even beyond that, God asks: You know what My Son's love looks like. Does your love look like His? That has to be our singular path forward - for life and for ministry - that all we do for Christ reflects Him. Let's pray!