

# **Truth for Today**

*The Bible teaching radio programme*

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For reply: Email: [truthfortoday@aol.com](mailto:truthfortoday@aol.com)

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**Speaker:** Mr. Gordon Kell

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## **Night Scenes of Scripture: A night with the Risen Lord - John 20**

In March this year I found myself standing, for the first time, on the shore of the Lake of Galilee. It was a very peaceful day and the lake was so calm. It reminded me of the time, in the Gospels, when the Lord Jesus had spoken to it and said, "Peace be still." I could well imagine a similar peaceful scene when the Lord appeared beside the same lake to present Himself in resurrection to His disciples. Peace, of course, is one of the marvellous outcomes of the resurrection. It is the very first word Jesus said to His disciples when He appeared to them as they gathered behind locked doors (John 20:19). In today's chapter we see how the Lord's presence brought peace and power into the lives of His disciples, particularly Peter and John.

This is seen in the three incidents recorded in this chapter. The first is about fishing, the second about feeding, and the third about following. Jesus taught His disciples how to fish for men. He prepared Peter to feed the flock of God. And, finally, he reminded Peter of the importance of following. In other words, in these three important resurrection stories we have brought before us evangelism, pastoral care and discipleship.

Peter had been called to become an evangelist. He had left his occupation as a fisherman to follow the Lord and become "a fisher of men". But at the beginning of the chapter we see Peter returning to the occupation he had left and influencing the other disciples to do the same. On the face of it, it seemed a pretty innocent action yet it is one which the Lord uses to teach us what happens when Christians act outside of the will of God. The fishermen had returned to jobs the Lord had called them from. As a result they struggled all night and caught nothing. This simple story brings home to our hearts something we all experience: the futility of going in the wrong direction and trying to work in our own strength. Sooner or later we discover that, in spite of all our efforts and persistence, there is no blessing. It is one thing to do this as an individual; it is more serious when we influence others to take the same steps. Peter was not at peace because he had denied the Lord and the matter had not been settled. So what did he do? He went back to what he knew best. His friends and fellow disciples were equally unsettled and followed him. A Christian friend once said to me, "If you don't know - don't". In other words, if you are unsure about what to do, wait until you are sure. Another Christian teacher who was a great help to me said, "If you are in a low spiritual state never make important decisions". This is sound advice. If we are away from the Lord we are vulnerable. It is not the right time to make decisions we would later regret and which would have a bad influence upon others. Peter, for all his failing, was a leader; where ever he went others followed. How important it is to realise that when we go in the wrong direction, it can also lead others to do the same.

The incident gives us a helpful insight into how we should evangelise. Fishing was a picture the Lord Jesus used in the Gospels to describe evangelising: "I will make you fishers of men". He visualises how people through the widespread preaching of the Gospel are taken out of the world and brought into His kingdom. However, evangelism can never be successful unless it is done under the direction of the Lord and in His power - that is the power of the Holy Spirit. This first incident in our chapter demonstrates, in the clearest possible way, what the Lord told His disciples in John 15:5, "for without Me you can do nothing". It is one of the most important lessons that we need to learn as Christians and in the work of evangelism. Sadly, it is also one we frequently forget.

Of course the Lord knew what Peter and his other disciples would do. He allowed them to have the experience of working all night and catching nothing. Do you sometimes feel like that? You put all your effort into the Lord's work but nothing seems to happen. We try to generate success in the Lord's work by our own efforts. This leads to one of three conclusions. We give up, we carry on the same way, or we stop and ask for the Lord's help.

Now do not misunderstand me. I am not belittling working hard for the Lord. As God's servants we have to be totally committed to His work. But we also have to work under His direction. In our chapter the Lord Jesus brought His presence into the disciples' circumstances. When they had achieved nothing and were ready to listen, He directs them. When our attempts at evangelism fail, what are we to do? Wait on the Lord! This is a very sound option. David reminds us in the Psalms to "be still and know that I am God". Moses had to wait and see the salvation of the Lord even though the Red Sea stood in his way and Pharaoh was charging towards him with the most powerful army in the world. The Lord, before He returned to heaven, commanded His disciples to wait at Jerusalem until the Holy Spirit came. John Milton wrote "they also serve who only stand and wait". In all the stress and pressure of today's world let us not forget the value of "waiting upon God". This is not inaction but wisdom.

So, after a long hard night of fishing the disciples had caught nothing at all. In the morning Jesus stood on the shore. It is interesting that the disciples did not immediately recognise Jesus. In resurrection, He still looked like an ordinary man coming into their world in the same lowly way He had entered it before the crucifixion. I suppose the morning suggests a new beginning. The Saviour starts by asking the fisherman if they had any food. He knew they did not have any but, in asking, reinforces the poverty of their situation. Before the Lord can bless us, we need to recognise our need to be blessed. Rather like Jacob at the end of his struggle with the Angel cries out, "I will not let You go except You bless me" (Genesis 32:26). That day Jacob's name was changed to Israel because he had discovered he needed God's blessing and power in his life.

The disciples' answer to the Lord's question was a simple no! They had nothing. The Lord demonstrates His person by telling them where to fish. He did not speak as an experienced fisherman who was guessing where the fish might be. He spoke as the God who put them there.

One night an evangelist was approached by a Christian who said, "I wish I could preach like you and bring people to the Saviour". The evangelist asked him what he did for a living and found out he was a street market trader. "So how many people do you meet each week?" asked the evangelist, "Hundreds!" was the answer. "So you have lots of opportunities to tell people about the Saviour!" suggested the evangelist. The message went home. The market trader quickly began introducing the Saviour to his customers and became a successful personal evangelist.

God knows the people who need Him and not many of them are found in our churches. So, what does He do? He puts us where the need is.

On another occasion when Jesus told Peter where to cast his nets, Peter had complained that they had fished and caught nothing but, because the Lord had asked, He would cast out one of his nets. His lack of faith had led to his net being too small to handle the many fish he caught. The Lord Jesus is so able to teach us spiritual lessons from ordinary life. Great faith results in great blessing. Little faith results in the embarrassment that we had not trusted God more. In verse 6, however, the fishermen cast their nets without question. Perhaps they were so tired they were willing to try anything! But their obedience to the Lord's word resulted in blessing. Their nets became so full of fish they could not draw them in.

When John (who always refers to himself in his Gospel as the disciple whom Jesus loved) saw what happened, he realises straight away that it is the Lord and tells Peter. I have always thought that Peter and John present to us two remarkable yet different disciples. Peter was questioning, direct and full of heart, whereas John was sensitive, thoughtful and ready to believe. Martha and Mary are two female disciples who demonstrate the same characteristics. Martha is also questioning, direct and hard working whilst Mary is contemplative, gentle and worshipping. It is wonderful to see in the body of Christ how different disciples work together to serve the Lord. In chapter 20 Peter and John had run together to the tomb of Jesus. John outran Peter but stopped at the entrance. Peter had no such hesitation and goes straight into the tomb. It is the same on the boat John recognises Jesus and tells Peter who immediately jumps into the sea to meet the Lord. Peter wanted to be near the Lord.

It was with some difficulty that the fish were landed. Today in the restaurants beside Galilee they still serve what they called St. Peter's fish. It is cooked whole so you get a complete fish on your plate. However, it is not the largest fish in the world and to make the meal more substantial you are given extra pieces of cooked fish. The fish that the disciples caught were quite different. One hundred and fifty three large fish. It was quite normal for the fishermen to count the fish which were caught so the catch could be equally divided. Each fish was valuable just as each saved person is of great value in the sight of God. Such a big catch needed a lot of effort to land; the fishermen worked as a team to do this. Evangelism involves teamwork. We have to work together in the important work of helping those who come to Christ. I think it is good to see Peter rushing to help his friends.

Jesus had breakfast ready for His disciples and He also asks them to bring some of what they had caught. It is important in the work of evangelism to come into the Lord's presence and allow Him to refresh us and give us a sense of His presence and power so that we can continue working for Him. It is also important to bring to Him what we have done and seek His blessing upon our work. I have always been struck by the story, in John 6, about the boy who brought the five barley loaves and the two small fish to Jesus. The boy was small, the fish were small and it was the cheapest of bread. But before distributing the meal to the crowd, Jesus gave thanks for the gift. I recently noticed that we are reminded again, in verse 23 of the same chapter, that Jesus gave thanks for this meal. The Lord values what we do for him and it is important, in work of evangelism, that we prayerfully present our service to the Lord and allow Him to refresh us through His word. His presence and power is essential to our service.

The second incident in this chapter is the powerful and touching interview between the Lord and His devoted disciple Peter. Peter was the most outstanding disciple yet he fell into the trap of self-confidence. It is a trap we all fall into. Peter felt he was ready to die for the Lord and attempted to protect Him, in the garden of Gethsemane, by attacking

the High Priest's servant and cutting off his ear. The Lord Jesus stopped His fiery disciple, healed the servant and went on into judgement and death. It was whilst Jesus was being questioned by the High Priest that Peter warmed himself by the courtyard fire of the servants. Before the cock crew, he had three times denied ever knowing the Saviour he loved. He discovered the bitterness of self confidence and the dangers we face when we do not wait on the Lord but act in our own wisdom and strength.

Now he finds himself warmed by a different fire - a fire the Lord had made to cook breakfast. He was not sitting with the world and those who hated Christ but with friends and his risen Lord. He had denied the Lord three times yet without a word of reproach and with enormous grace, the Lord asks Peter three times, "Do you love me?" The first time He asks Peter if he loved Him more than His other disciples. This was a reference to what Peter had said in Mark 14:29 when he was sure he would not let the Lord down, even if all the other disciples did. Peter replies not on the basis of the strength of his love or devotion to the Lord but upon what the Lord Himself knew. Twice more the Lord Jesus asks Peter if he loved Him. On the final occasion, Peter, having a deep sense of his own failure in denying the Lord three times replies on the basis of the greatness of the Person asking him the question. He says, "Lord, You know all things". In the original language, in his answers, Peter does not use the same word for love as the Lord did but, in his humility, confessed an attachment to the Lord. In his final answer, Peter depends entirely upon the God of grace who knew Peter's utter failure but also knew the love he had in his heart for the Saviour who loved him so much.

What was Jesus doing? He was fulfilling His ministry as a shepherd, restoring His failing servant and establishing him in His grace. He did not punish His servant but brought home to Peter that the Lord's love and grace had not changed and encouraged him to serve Him in humility.

This second incident is about pastoral care. Firstly, the Lord's pastoral care for Peter himself. The Lord first called Peter to become an evangelist, a fisher of men. Now after restoring after Peter, the Lord calls him to be a pastor. On each occasion when the Lord Jesus questions Peter's love for Him he gives Peter a commission. First to "feed my lambs", then to "shepherd my sheep" and finally to "feed my sheep". This demonstrates some important lessons about pastoral care for the people of God. The Lord entrusts such work to those who have themselves experienced the Lord's pastoral care in their own lives and as a result serve the Lord in dependence and humility. It also reminds us that Christians belong to Christ. Sometimes pastors refer to Christians they help as "my flock". But the flock is not theirs: it belongs to Christ. Once we think in terms of the flock belonging to us, we can fall into the dangers of abusing our responsibility and trying to dominate the people of God. Jesus teaches in John 10:16 that there is only one flock, made up of Jewish and Gentile Christians, and there is one shepherd; the Lord Himself.

The Lord's words indicate those who are His first concern; the young when he describes as lambs. It is the first responsibility of the pastor to spiritually feed those who are immature in the Christian faith to help them grow. This includes both those who are young in years and also those who have recently become Christians. Then the work of the pastor amongst the people of God embraces shepherding and feeding. The people of God need to be fed on the word of God which helps us to grow both in the knowledge of Christ and in the practical demonstration of our faith. The pastor teaches from the word but also has responsibility to give an example to the people of God. Peter exhorts elders to be "examples to the flock" (1 Peter 5:3).

The third section part of our chapter is about following the Lord or discipleship. In verses 18 and 19, Jesus prophesied Peter's martyrdom. Traditionally it is believed that Peter was crucified upside down because he did not feel worthy to die as his Lord did. This tradition certainly this is in line with the great humility which marks Peter in his writings. Verse 19 ends with discipleship when the Lord Jesus says to Peter, "Follow me". It seems that, after the Lord had spoken to Peter, they walked along the beach together. Peter notices his friend John following behind and asks Jesus what would happen to John. The Lord had just told Peter what would happen in his life and Peter knew that the Lord knew all things. So, you can understand him wanting to know about his friend John. The Lord's reply demonstrates an important feature of discipleship. Discipleship is a personal following of Jesus. Jesus did not say that John would not die but that, if that did happen, it was nothing to do with Peter. As a disciple, Peter's first responsibility was to follow the Lord. Jesus says to him and to us, "You follow Me".

We are naturally concerned about others but sometimes we pry too much into the lives of other Christians. This leads to making judgements about each other and then telling each one what we should do. The Lord makes it quite clear that each disciple is to follow and serve his Lord. This does not mean the path the Lord has for each of His people is identical. It is not our business to interfere in the service of another Christian. Each Christian will give an account of his service to the Lord at the judgement seat of Christ and will also receive a reward for his faithfulness.

It is interesting that the early Christians had the same problems as we have when it comes to misunderstanding things. What the Lord said about John's discipleship was misunderstood. Have you ever played that party game where everyone sits in a circle and a statement is whispered to the first person. Then they have to repeat it to next person until it reaches the last person in the group. Invariably the last statement differs considerably from what was

said at the beginning. There was once a general in the midst of a battle who sent the message, "Send reinforcements; we are going to advance" down the line of command. The message which reached headquarters was, "Send one and threepence; we are going to the dance"!

True disciples need to follow the Lord's commands, not someone else's interpretation of what the Lord has said. Christians have been guilty of putting man's thoughts before God's thoughts. That is what happened at the beginning of our chapter when Peter went his own way and took other disciples with him. All their efforts failed. Once the Lord intervened and the disciples obeyed His word they prospered. Things have not changed. Simple obedience to the word of God is vital to effective evangelism, to care for His people and to discipleship. Let us pray that the Lord will help us in this way to be better fishers, better feeders and better followers.

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