

# Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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## Double Calls: More Double Calls in Scripture: Simon, Simon!

There are few lives which the Bible describes in such graphic detail in Cromwell's words, "warts and all". During his life, Peter witnessed the testimony, miracles, rejection, sufferings, and death of Christ. He was the first of an inner group of disciples, which included James and John, who were chosen to be with the Lord Jesus on special occasions. They were on the mount of transfiguration. They were there when Jesus raised Jairus' daughter from the dead. They were invited to watch with the Lord when He prayed in the garden of Gethsemane. Peter was also a witness to Christ's resurrection and ascension to heaven. Later, empowered by the Holy Spirit, he preached at Pentecost when thousands of Jews turned to Christ. Then later he preached in the house of Cornelius when the Gentiles received the Holy Spirit. He continued for many years to be a great blessing to the Church and his long and fruitful life ended in martyrdom. Tradition holds that he was crucified upside down because he felt unworthy to die in the same way as Christ had.

It is the double call of Peter in Luke 22:31-32, which is our text for this morning's talk. "And the Lord said, 'Simon, Simon! Indeed, Satan has asked for you, that he may sift you as wheat. But I have prayed for you, that your faith should not fail; and when you have returned to Me strengthen your brethren.'"

I think these words of the Lord to Peter are central to the apostle's discipleship. They also help us to have a greater understanding of our own Christian discipleship. To find out why they are so important we need to trace Peter's spiritual history.

It is easy for us to make the mistake of looking at the events of Peter's life in isolation. A more careful observation reveals a pattern of spiritual growth. Peter's story shows how Christ took a rough, uneducated, headstrong fisherman and made him into a great believer, disciple, witness and pastor. In his story we discover much we can identify with and even more that we can learn from.

Peter's story begins in John 1:41-42 when his brother, Andrew, introduces him to Jesus. Henry Moorhouse, the nineteenth century evangelist, was called the "The man who moved the man who moved the world" because of the effect his preaching had upon DL Moody. Andrew led Peter to Christ and, in turn, Peter led thousands to the Saviour. Peter was brought to Jesus by the personal evangelism of Andrew. It is Andrew who brings the boy who had the loaves and fishes to Jesus in John 6. Then when the Greeks go to Philip, in John 12, to see Jesus, Philip in turn tells Andrew and they approach Jesus. Andrew was one of the first two disciples of John the Baptist who followed Jesus. Having discovered the Saviour himself, he immediately brings his own brother to Christ. Andrew seems to have been a very approachable man with the ability to lead others to Jesus. Today, more than ever, we need Christians like Andrew.

Peter's first meeting with Jesus is significant. The Lord gives him a new name, Cephas, which means "a stone" which in Greek is *Petros* from which we get Peter. Peter is called, with Andrew, to follow Jesus to enter lives of service: "Then [Jesus] said to them, 'Follow Me, and I will make you fishers of men. Then they immediately left their nets and followed Him.'" (Matthew 4:19-20). So began Peter's discipleship.

In Luke 5 we begin to see the deepening of Peter's understanding of the Person of Christ. After speaking to the crowds from Peter's boat, the Lord directs Peter to launch out into the deep and cast his nets. Peter's character immediately displays itself. He, as a seasoned fisherman thinks he knows better than the Lord, and complains that he had fished all night and caught nothing. Nevertheless, he casts a net. Of course, the net could not contain the many fish which were caught! Then Peter falls down at the feet of Jesus. He immediately recognises the greatness of Saviour and, at the same time, his own unworthiness to be in Christ's presence. This is the essence of Peter. On the one hand a man who had great confidence in himself and his abilities. On the other hand, a man with the remarkable spiritual insight to recognise and respond to the greatness of the Person of Christ. It is no wonder that when the apostles are listed Peter is always placed first.

Later, outside Caesarea Philippi Jesus asks all the disciples, "Who do men say that I, the Son of Man am?" There are several suggestions. Then Jesus asks "But who do you say that I am?" Peter immediately replies, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God". The Lord answers Peter's confession with these wonderful words, "Blessed are you,

Simon Bar-jonah, for flesh and blood has not revealed 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, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it. And I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.” This was a high point in Peter’s story. He was the first to confess the Person of Christ. The Lord blessed him and tells him this revelation had come to Peter from the Father. The Lord also makes the distinction between Peter, petros, a detached stone or boulder, and “this rock”, petra, which means a mass of rock. Christ was “this rock” the foundation upon which His church would be built (see 1 Corinthians 3:11 and 1 Peter 2:4-8). Peter had a great part to play, as did the other apostles, in the foundational ministry of the Church described in Ephesians 2, but Christ Himself is the foundation, and the builder, of His church. The keys of the kingdom were used by Peter when, at Pentecost and later in the house of Cornelius, he led both Jews and Gentiles into the Church of God. This was a fulfilment of the Lord’s words in John 10 when He speaks of “two folds”, that is Jews and Gentiles, from which “one flock”, the Church is formed. From his first meeting with Jesus when he was given the name Cephas “a stone”, Peter had arrived at the point where he declared before all the other disciples who Jesus was. His confession marked not only the growth in Peter’s soul and a revelation of his future service, but the very basis of salvation and the formation of Christ’s Church. Peter is marked out by Christ for a life of great service, but soon afterwards Jesus has to deal with another side of Peter’s character.

Jesus begins to teach His disciples about His suffering, death and resurrection. Peter rebukes the Lord Jesus insisting that such things would never happen to Him. Jesus’ response is well known, “Get behind Me, Satan! You are an offence to Me, for you are not mindful of the things of God, but the things of men.” Peter had spoken out of a heart of devotion to his Lord. He believed Christ would restore and rule over Israel. He did not yet understand that Jesus had come to sacrifice His life for the world. Once more, Peter thought he knew better than the Lord. How often do we make the same mistake?

Discipleship is linked to discipline. It is about someone else having control over our lives. It is the most difficult part of Christian discipleship to submit to the authority of Christ and the will of God. This was the great lesson Jesus had to teach Peter. And it took a long time and a great deal of pain before Peter understood what Jesus was teaching him.

We do not have time this morning to follow all the events in Peter’s life but what we have looked back on is enough to understand the character of Peter who had so faithfully followed the Lord Jesus. So let us return to that Passover night when Jesus spoke so personally to Peter about the way Satan wanted to destroy his faith but Jesus had prayed for him that his faith would not fail. To grow as a disciple Peter had to learn about himself - the most painful experience. The story of Peter’s bitter discovery shows us the remarkable love the Lord Jesus has for His disciples and His ability to demonstrate His power through our weakness.

The words Jesus spoke to Peter give us some important insights into Christian experience. The context in which the words are spoken is very important. The disciples had been arguing amongst themselves who should be the greatest. On that Passover night, they sat with Jesus, the true Passover Lamb. Luke 22 tells us that Jesus began the evening with the words, “With desire I have desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer”. He had wanted to spend the hours before the cross with those who were closest to Him. Sadly, the disciples, including Peter, were not thinking of His greatness but arguing which of them would be the greatest. Our pride and self interest often intrude upon the holiest of moments. John 13 records how Jesus arose from the table to wash the disciples’ feet to give them a vivid picture of true greatness - the willingness to serve one another in love.

It is very interesting to read about the laver in Exodus 30:17-21. The laver was a large bowl made to contain water with which the priests washed. It stood between the altar of burnt offering and the door of the tabernacle and was made from copper. Where did the copper to make the laver come from? Exodus 38:8 gives us the answer - the copper mirrors of the serving women were donated and used to make the laver. Those mirrors which reflected self occupation were sacrificed to make the laver! The women of the Old Testament had learnt a lesson the New Testament disciples had yet to learn in John 13. What were the disciples doing as they discussed who should be the greatest? They were “looking in the mirror” of self interest. When Jesus rose to wash the disciples’ feet, He introduced them to the laver - a place where self was put to one side and service for others was paramount. That was what Peter was going to learn, when Jesus said to him, “when you have returned to Me, strengthen your brethren.”

Whenever Jesus uses a person’s name twice or, indeed, any word twice it emphasises the importance of what He is about to say. It also highlights the need for us to listen. Jesus then demonstrates His understanding of the spiritual dangers we cannot see. Satan, Jesus explains, wanted to sift all the disciples like wheat. That is, he wanted to put them all through difficult times in the hope that their faith in Christ would be destroyed. The “you” in verse 31 is plural and applies to all the disciples. This happened when, in Jesus’ words in Mark 14:27, “All of you will be made to stumble because of Me this night, for it is written: ‘I will strike the Shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered.’” Although there was to be a very hard time for the disciples, it is encouraging to notice how the Lord knew the circumstances they would pass through. We can apply this to ourselves. The circumstances we pass through, whether our responsibility or not, are known to the Lord. And He prays for us in these circumstances. Jesus speaks

about this priestly service of intercession to Peter. "I have prayed for you". The Lord's intercession is specific and addresses our needs as individuals. In Peter's case, Jesus prays that Peter's faith would not fail. But the priestly care which the Lord has for us does not simply meet our needs. It also transforms us into more Christlike servants, "when you have returned to Me, strengthen your brethren." Notice the centrality of Christ, "when you have returned to Me". The experience which Peter was about to pass through would teach him how things can go dreadfully wrong when we trust in ourselves and take our eyes off Christ. It was a lesson Peter had already experienced.

You will remember the story in Matthew 14 of Peter walking on the water to meet Jesus. He was the only man ever, apart from Christ, to walk on water. "But when he saw that the wind was boisterous, he was afraid; and beginning to sink he cried out, saying, "Lord, save me!" And immediately Jesus stretched out His hand and caught him, and said to him, "O you of little faith, why did you doubt?" This is a trap we all fall into at some time or another. Peter teaches us that in such circumstances the Lord Jesus remains our faithful High Priest who ever lives to make intercession for us and who has the ability, not only to sustain us through crisis, but to use such experiences to make us more effective servants.

The reaction of Peter to the Lord's tender words demonstrate how far he had sunk into the deceitful waters of self belief. "Lord, I am ready to go with You, both to prison and to death." In John 13:37, he goes even further insisting, "I will lay down my life for Your sake." Jesus had already spoken of Himself as the Good Shepherd who would lay down His life for His sheep. Peter has the audacity to tell the Son of God that he would lay down his life for Christ. The Lord's response is both tender, "Will you lay down your life for My sake?", and prophetic. "Most assuredly, I say to you, the cock shall not crow till you have denied Me three times." It is remarkable that after describing Peter's failure, the Lord Jesus adds at the beginning of John 14, "Let not your heart be troubled". In spite of our deepest failure, the Lord's grace and love remain absolutely certain. We should not forget that all the disciples joined Peter in insisting that they would not let the Lord down. They really wanted to stand by the Lord Jesus.

Afterwards, Jesus took His disciples to the Garden of Gethsemane and asked Peter, James and John to watch with Him whilst He prayed to the Father about going to the cross. In Gethsemane, which means "olive press", the Lord Jesus endured an agony so intense His sweat was as great drops of blood and an angel came to strengthen Him. We cannot understand the inner depths of Christ's suffering as He contemplated the cross. And what did He want? His inner circle of disciples to be with Him! And what happened? They fell asleep! Finding them asleep, Jesus says to Peter, "What could you not watch with Me one hour?" It is a telling comment. Peter, who believed himself capable of so much, was not there when the Lord wanted him to do the simplest of things. Is it not also true of us that we feel capable of doing great things for God but often fail to do the simplest of tasks when we are most needed? Peter was more concerned about doing things he was neither, nor asked, to do than responding to what Jesus wanted. This is the great challenge of discipleship - doing what God asks us.

When the soldiers come to take Jesus captive, Peter springs to His defence, cutting off the High Priest's servant's ear. The Lord speaks again to Peter, "Put your sword into the sheath. Shall I not drink the cup which my Father has given Me?" Throughout this dreadful time for the Lord, it is amazing that He constantly speaks to Peter and teaches him about true discipleship. As the Lord is led away, Peter "follows afar off" and, for the very first time, Peter is alone. In the courtyard of the High Priest, a servant girl suspects that he is a disciple of Jesus. "I am not", he replies. As he warms himself at the fire, he is challenged a second and a third time until, cursing and swearing, he denies his Lord. Luke records that Jesus turned and looked at Peter. I am sure this was a look of compassion and love. Peter remembered the Lord's words and went out and wept bitterly.

It has always appealed to me that the resurrection stories are stories of the Great Shepherd gathering His scattered sheep. The disciples were confused and afraid. But in resurrection, Jesus appears to the broken hearted Mary, the two sad disciples on the road to Emmaus, the doubtful Thomas, and to Peter. He gathers them around Himself. The angel's message in Mark is so touching: "But go tell His disciples - and Peter - that He is going before you into Galilee". Jesus wanted His disciples, and especially Peter, to know of His resurrection. We cannot imagine the pain of Peter as he must have recalled over and over again his denial of the Lord he loved and wanted to serve. In Galilee, he was about to discover the grace which would take that pain away and restore him to great usefulness.

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.

In John 21, Peter 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 - not self confidence.

The Lord first called Peter to become an evangelist, a fisher of men. Now after restoring 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 these 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. We saw in John 10:16 that there is only one flock and one Shepherd: the Lord Himself.

The Lord's words indicate those who are His first concern; the young whom He describes as lambs. It is the first responsibility of the pastor to provide spiritual food for 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 of God 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).

Peter wrote in his first letter "...that you may grow..." (1 Peter 2:2). The Lord Jesus wants us "to grow up into Him" (Ephesians 4:15). Growth is sometimes a painful experience but it is an essential one. Peter's story is about the growth of a soul. He grew because he learnt from the last recorded words that the Lord Jesus said directly to him: "...you follow Me." The Spirit of God has recorded the life of Peter that through the Lord Jesus might speak directly to each one of us: "You follow Me." The challenge is to listen and to obey!

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