

Christmas- Hope For All

by
Rocky Fleming

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." 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." 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. John 21:15-17 (ESV)

Men, I've been away on sabbatical for several weeks. Although there were good things about it, the best assessment I have is it is good to be back, and among my brothers and ministry that I have missed so much. After my time away I realize that I might need you guys more than you need me. So I'm back and glad to be serving the Lord in this ministry that I love so much. But I also love teaching God's word. I love digging into it and finding some things that are hidden from the initial reading of it, and then sharing it.

An example is the profound hidden *diamond* of truth we see in the drama above, which might not be easily seen by only a quick look at it. So, let's try to understand it better. When I read the above verse today, I was reminded of the tour of Israel that my wife and I went on last February. It was a great trip and it now causes us to read the Bible differently, even more personally than before. On this trip we were baptized in the Jordan River, right below where it flows out of the Sea of Galilee. You do the math about an outdoor baptism in February. Yes, it was cold! But, it was so very special for Sallie and me, for my first time being baptized was when I was nine years old in a little Baptist Church in Laurel, Mississippi. My wife was dedicated as an infant through baptism, but then chose to be baptized in our church when we were first married. They were good initial experiences for us. But, the baptisms we had in February were the best. There were many other revelations from that trip that made each story in the Bible come alive for us, such as the drama we see in the passage above. This is an example:

When I was on the Sea of Galilee, especially at Capernaum that was Peter's hometown, the *fish story* and the reaffirmation of Peter by Jesus that we see in the passage above

came alive to me as never before. I could look at the body of water when I stood on the banks of the sea and visualize Peter in my mind's eye, as he swam to shore after he had enthusiastically propelled himself from the fishing boat to swim to Jesus. I could see the emotional, excited Peter dripping wet, panting from the fast swim to shore, standing before his Lord and friend. Before long, and much too soon for Peter, the other disciples came in dragging a net full of fish interrupting Peter's time alone with Jesus. Jesus had a fire going when all the men came ashore and He told them to bring some fish and cook them for breakfast. Just think how good those fresh fish would taste, as the men ate them and talked with their newly resurrected Savior? Just think that only a few days before how these men were in the deepest, darkest time of their life because Jesus had been taken from them, stripped and beaten unmercifully in a public setting, and then crucified by the cruelest means of execution that has ever been devised by mankind? They were all exhilarated to be eating this breakfast with Him that morning. Can you imagine this?

But maybe out the bunch of men around that fire there was one man who couldn't enjoy it like the others because of the lump in his stomach that he carried. The inner turmoil in him was because of the guilt he felt as a result of betraying his friend? Do you think Jesus knew this about Peter? After all the Good Shepherd knows the condition of His flock at all times, right? Do you think Jesus knew that there would be only one way for Peter to come back to the relationship he once enjoyed with his friend and Savior, for he would not allow it for himself? This man Peter dwelt in the disgrace of not deserving being restored to what he once had with Jesus. He had given himself a self-made trial, and then judged and convicted himself, and was now living out a self-inflicted exile for what he had done. No, he could not be the one who would allow a commute of his life sentence from being banished from his friendship with Jesus. Only Jesus could do it, and Jesus knew this. In the passage above we see Jesus taking Peter through the process of restoring him, and He also gives us an example to live by today in dealing with others. The reason I am drawing our attention to this passage is because of what my son taught me about its Greek translation, and how it makes the verse come alive, as much as my standing on the Sea of Galilee watching the drama unfold. Let me share how this passage was originally written and how we should understand it. This is my son Gorden's insight:

*For years I read this passage, not really knowing what was going on. **Jesus:** Do you love me? **Peter:** I do love you. **Jesus:** Do you love me? **Peter:** I do love you. **Jesus:** Do you love me? **Peter:**(Frustrated) Yes, You know I love you! But what is really is happening here?*

There are roughly three types of love in the Greek language: Phileo (brotherly love), Eros (erotic love), Agape (unconditional love). And two of the three show up here. So let's breathe some Greek and drama into the scene, and look at it this way:

*Jesus and Peter, eating fish on the side of the Sea of Galilee... Peter faced with the worst shame anyone could ever face in life, sitting across from the very man he, just days ago, said he never knew... **Jesus looks at Peter:** "Peter, do you Agape me (love me unconditionally)?" **Peter:** "No Lord, you know I Phileo you (love you like a friend)." **Jesus:** Peter, do you Agape me? **Peter:**[Sigh...] No, Lord, I Phileo you... **Jesus:** Peter, do you Agape me? **Peter:** (being reminded of the full weight of his failure - devastated says...) Lord, no. You know what I did, you know how I failed, I thought I loved you Agape, but I don't. I can't. I am unworthy.*

Jesus: Peter, now, you are ready - lead my church...

Wow! I hope this sequence of the restoration of Peter hits you like it does me, for there is not one human being out there who hasn't made a mistake, or even denied knowing Christ in some way by the way we act, and we need the assurance that we can be restored by Him. Peter is not alone in his act of denial of Christ, and we can all be included in the issue of denying Christ. We can't throw stones at Peter without hitting our self. All of us have and will make mistakes, and if anyone doesn't look at his own faults before retaining the right to judge another man for his mistakes, then he is without understanding of himself, and he has no idea of God's point of view. What is God's point of view about restoration of someone who has stumbled and fallen, especially if that man or woman is in our life and we are having a hard time forgiving that person?

Concerning Peter, although Jesus had every right to do so, Jesus dismissed His right to judge and condemn Peter, and instead carefully and delicately restored him. Jesus "graced" Peter so completely that Peter was made worthy by Jesus to lead the Church that would be formed around those disciples. Satan had sifted Peter and had broken him, but he was not to remain in this broken state. Jesus lovingly restored him and put him back together, which is what He does for all of us. That is the picture of the benefit of brokenness and the essential putting us back together that grace provides. It is also an example that Christ has given to us to replicate, and the perspective that we need to embrace if we want to have the mind of Christ.

I think there are a lot of people who have made some mistakes and think, like Peter, that they cannot recover from those mistakes. They feel unworthy. If you feel this way, I am here to encourage anyone that God will take you back, and He can make good out of the worst of situations if you will allow Him to do so. But then there are those who fail to look at the log in their own eye and they become prosecutor, juror, judge and executioner. They do not want someone to recover from his or her mistakes, and they want to punish them by putting a permanent *brand* on the person that can never be removed. They think this person is forever flawed, and does not deserve to be forgiven. But oh how this *Pharisee of Judgmental-ism* allows the demons of hell to come into his life to take him to a very dark place because of his un-forgiveness. If you are this person or think this way I will tell you that you are in great, great danger with that perspective, for it doesn't come from Christ, and what is worse is it will become the standard by which you will be judged. Are you ready to be judged as you judge others? Most people in their right mind, or at least with the perspective of Christ would want to avoid that standard at all costs. If you don't, you will understand one day why you needed to.

So why am I sharing these things? It has to do with Christ and His family dispensing *hope*. It's about understanding that Jesus gives us the *hope* that He will forgive us and restore us to Him when we are broken like Peter, and seek His forgiveness. It is to help us all, like Peter, understand that we all desperately need Jesus' grace to complete the task or restoration. As members of God's family we have no right to take from someone this *hope*, by putting our own spin on the conditions of forgiveness. Understand, there is no one that Christ will withhold His grace and forgiveness from if it is sought, for that is how thorough His grace is to us. But, He will allow us to go to a dark place in our soul if we judge and condemn someone to a life sentence of being un-forgiven just because we think he deserves it. In fact I think that this might be one of those sins against Christ that will require a large dose of bitter discipline to work it out of us. So do yourself a favor and stay away from that kind of thinking about another person, for it will lead to a very dark place in your soul. Also remember: By the same standard that we judge we will be judged. Giving someone grace when it is not deserved is a return blessing, for it is very much the way Jesus restores someone.

When Jesus was born He brought to the world *hope*. When He taught, He brought *hope*. When He submitted His life to the cross, He secured *hope* for us. When He resurrected from death, He proved that we have *hope* for a life after death. His Spirit lives within us to remind us of the *hope* we have been given and lives within us. Now, as we celebrate His birthday allow yourself to take the *hope* that He has secured for you, and then also give it someone else by forgiving and restoring someone by your

grace, as Jesus has done for you. Give that person the *hope* that Jesus has given to you. Then you will understand better how the Spirit of Christmas has worked its way into your heart.

Merry Christmas, and God bless you,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Rocky Hemming". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, looping initial 'R' and a long, sweeping tail on the 'g'.