Exploring the Bible—Gospel of John (22)

The Shepherding in Love

**Scripture Reading:**

2 Simon Peter and Thomas, called Didymus, and Nathanael from Cana of Galilee and the sons of Zebedee and two others of His disciples were there together. 3 Simon Peter said to them, I am going fishing. They said to him, We also are coming with you. They went forth and got into the boat, and that night they caught nothing. 4 Now as soon as the morning broke, Jesus stood on the shore; however the disciples did not know that it was Jesus. 5 Then Jesus said to them, Little children, you do not have any fish to eat, do you? They answered Him, No. 6 And He said to them, Cast the net on the right side of the boat, and you will find some. They cast therefore, and they were no longer able to haul it in because of the abundance of fish. 7 Then that disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, It is the Lord! Therefore when Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he put his outer garment around himself, for he was naked; and he threw himself into the sea. 8 But the other disciples came in the little boat, for they were not far from the land, but about two hundred cubits away, dragging the net of fish. 9 Then when they got out onto the land, they saw a fire of coals laid there, and fish lying on it and bread. 10 Jesus said to them, Bring some of the fish that you have just now caught. 11 Simon Peter therefore went up and hauled the net to the land full of large fish, a hundred and fifty-three; and though there were so many, the net was not torn. 12 Jesus said to them, Come and have breakfast. But none of the disciples dared to inquire of Him, Who are you? knowing that it was the Lord. 13 Jesus came and took the bread and gave it to them, and the fish likewise. 14 This was now the third time that Jesus was manifested to the disciples after He had been raised from the dead. 15 Then when they had eaten 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 again 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, Shepherd My sheep. 17 He said to him the third time, Simon, son of John, do you love Me? Peter was grieved that He said to him the third time, Do you love Me? And he said to Him, Lord, You know all things; You know that I love You. Jesus said to him, Feed My sheep. (John 21:2-17)

**Ministry Reading:**

In 21:15 the Lord Jesus said to Simon Peter, “Simon, son of John, do you love Me more than these?” The Lord was here restoring Peter’s love toward Him. Peter did have a heart to love the Lord, but he was too confident of his own strength, his natural strength. His love for the Lord was precious, but his natural strength had to be denied and dealt with. The Lord allowed him to utterly fail by denying Him to His face three times (18:17, 25, 27) so that his natural strength and his self-confidence might be dealt with. Furthermore, Peter had just taken the lead in backsliding from the Lord’s call. His natural confidence in his love toward the Lord must also have been dealt with by this failure. Since he might have been somewhat disappointed, the Lord came to restore his love toward Him, to charge him with the shepherding of His church, and to prepare him for his martyrdom, so that he would not follow Him with any confidence in his natural strength.

How did the Lord deal with Peter’s natural strength? By temporarily taking His hand off him. In 10:28, the Lord said that no one is able to snatch the believers out of His hand. When Peter betrayed the Lord, denying Him to His face three times, it meant that the Lord had taken His hand off him for a while. The Lord seemed to be saying, “Peter, you have too much confidence in yourself. You don’t know that your standing depends upon My holding you in My hand. If I don’t hold you, you cannot stand. Let Me take My hand away for a while and see if you are able to stand.” Then the Lord stood back a little, and Peter fell. Do not think that you have the power to stand. No, an unseen hand upholds us all the time. Because Peter was so strong, having too much confidence in himself, the Lord was forced to temporarily remove His hand. As a result, Peter fell and denied the Lord three times. Moreover, Peter could not stand the test of his daily living and took the lead to backslide to the sea. Perhaps Peter thought that he had reason to do this because, at that point, he had not seen the supply of the Lord. Nevertheless, by his backsliding Peter was exposed. The Lord withdrew His hand for a little while, and Peter was fully exposed. This was the Lord’s dealing.

In chapter twenty-one, Peter was humble and very low. Undoubtedly he was quite disappointed. Thus, the Lord came in to recover, strengthen, and restore him. It is quite meaningful that, in front of all the other disciples, the Lord asked Peter, “Do you love Me more than these?” The Lord seemed to be saying, “Simon, have you forgotten that a few days ago you said, in the presence of all the others, that although they would forsake Me, you would follow Me to death? That was your word. Now, Simon, I ask you if you love Me more than these do?” If I had been Peter, I would not have had the face to say anything. Peter simply replied, “Yes, Lord, You know that I love You” (v. 15). Peter could not answer the Lord with a clear word, for he was in a very perplexing situation. He did not say, “Lord, I love You,” or, “Lord, I don’t love You.” How would you have answered the Lord if you had been Peter? Would you have said, “Yes, Lord, I love You more than all of these”? Would you have said, “Lord, I’m sorry I don’t love You,” or, “Lord, I’m sorry that I boasted and was unable to fulfill it”? Peter had lost his self-confidence and could say nothing except, “Lord, You know that I love You.”

In verses 16 and 17, we see that the Lord twice more asked Peter, “Simon, son of John, do you love Me?” When the Lord asked him this the third time, Peter was deeply grieved. He was grieved for two reasons. The first was that the Lord asked him this question three times. If I asked you the same question three times, you also would feel quite troubled. The second reason Peter was grieved was that by asking him this question three times, the Lord was reminding Peter that he had denied Him three times. When Peter denied the Lord, he was warming himself by a fire (18:25). There was also a fire in John 21. Thus, the Lord caused Peter to remember what he did by that fire and to realize what he was and where he was. Peter fully learned that lesson.

After restoring Peter’s love toward Him, the Lord Jesus charged him, saying, “Feed My lambs,” “Shepherd My sheep,” and “Feed My sheep.” The fruit-bearing in chapter fifteen is the outflow of the riches of the inner life. Here the lamb-feeding is the nourishing with the riches of the inner life. In order to feed others we need to enjoy the riches of the Lord’s divine life. This requires that we love Him.

Lamb-feeding is by the nourishing with the riches of the inner life, and sheep-shepherding is for the building of the church. Shepherding is for the “flock” (10:14, 16), which is the church (Acts 20:28). Therefore, it is related to God’s building (Matt. 16:18). Later, in his first Epistle, Peter indicated this by saying that growth, by feeding on the pure milk of the Word, is for the building of God’s house (1 Pet. 2:2-5) and by charging the elders to shepherd the flock of God (1 Pet. 5:1-4). The growth by nourishing is for the building. The Lord is still working with His disciples in this way. Today, by lamb-feeding and sheep-shepherding, the Lord is working with us for the building of the church.

By considering three chapters, John 10, and 1 Peter 2 and 5, we shall see that feeding the lambs and shepherding the sheep are for the building up of the church. According to John 10, the Lord laid down His soulish life that His sheep might have His divine life and be brought together as one flock. To bring all His sheep together as one is truly the building. In 1 Peter 2, Peter says that we, as newborn babes, must be fed with the pure milk of the Word that we might grow up to be built up together as a spiritual house. Finally, in 1 Peter 5, Peter, as one of the elders, charges the elders to care for the sheep by feeding and shepherding them. Feeding the sheep is different from shepherding them. In 21:15 the Lord said, “Feed My lambs”; in 21:16, He said, “Shepherd My sheep”; and in 21:17, He said, “Feed My sheep.” To shepherd means to take care of the sheep, and to feed means to supply food to the sheep. While we are serving the Lord today, we must not only care for His sheep, but also feed them with spiritual food. It is not sufficient simply to care for and to look after the brothers and sisters; we must also feed them. Both the young believers and the more matured believers need the feeding. If the Lord has committed to us the burden of His flock, we must be sure to do two things—to feed them and to care for them.

Question for Discussion: What does “shepherd” mean? What is the relationship between Peter being dealt with by the Lord and receiving the charge to shepherd His sheep? Share your experience in shepherding.

Reference: Life-Study of John, Msg. 49