

HOW ST. PETER WAS PUNISHED FOR DENYING HIS LORD

**"Simon, son of Jonas, lovest thou Me more than these?"
– John 21:15-17.**

THE CONTEXT SHOWS that these words were addressed by the Redeemer to St. Peter on the occasion of His third manifestation to His disciples after His resurrection. This was presumably three or four weeks after the Master's resurrection from the dead. His manifestations to the women on the morning of His resurrection and His later manifestation to the two as they went to Emmaus are evidently not counted, but the manifestation the same evening in the upper room, when all the disciples except Thomas and Judas were present, is counted the first. And the manifestation a week later, Thomas being present, is counted the second.

The delay in giving this third manifestation was evidently for the purpose of testing the faith of the Apostles and of leading them to reach a conclusion respecting their future course, which Jesus wished to correct. So far as we can understand the record at least two Sundays passed without any further manifestation of Jesus to His disciples, and then, giving up hope, they decided to return to the fishing business and did so. The journey to Galilee and the resumption of business presumably took another week.

During all those thirty days the mental attitude of all the Apostles and the other disciples can be better imagined than described. They were perplexed, they had indeed had evidences of the Master's resurrection; they had had the Scriptures called to their attention which proved that this was necessary and that God had previously so arranged. They had hoped for further conferences with Jesus and that He would have told them definitely what to do.

Instead, left to themselves, the disciples were thoroughly disheartened. They had left all to follow Him, to tell the people that He was the Son of God, the long-promised Messiah, and that He would soon set up His Kingdom, which would bring blessings, primarily to Israel and, secondarily, through Israel, to all the families of the earth in harmony with the Abrahamic Covenant. Now apparently all of these hopes were dashed, frustrated. How foolish they thought it would seem for them to try to convince the people that a man, crucified as a malefactor, as a blasphemer, was indeed the Messiah! How foolish it would seem to tell of His resurrection! They felt that they could do nothing else than abandon the ministry as a lost cause; and the resumption of the fishing business was the logical conclusion.

THEY TOILED ALL THE NIGHT

Their first night was a discouraging one – they caught nothing. It looked indeed as though God was punishing them for the course they had taken in becoming disciples of Jesus – that everything was going wrong. But not so; they were merely being taught needed lessons.

In the morning they beheld a stranger on the shore who beckoned and shouted to know if they had any fish for sale. They replied, No, they had made no catch. The stranger suggested casting the net on the other side of the boat. And, although the suggestion seemed a foolish one, having been so unsuccessful, yet they did so, and immediately the net was filled with fishes! It did not require long for them to learn the lesson. They knew instinctively that the unknown stranger upon the shore was none other than their Master. They remembered a very similar experience at the time they were first called to leave their nets and to become fishers of men.

All interest had just centered in the fishing business, but now boats and fish and nets all lost their value in the estimation of these fishermen. Here was their risen Lord, for whose third appearance they had been waiting now nearly three weeks. Fearing that the Master would disappear, even before he could get to him, St. Peter plunged

into the sea and swam ashore. To his surprise the stranger already had fish and had them cooked, and all were invited to join in the breakfast on the shore of Galilee.

The stranger had not the clothing by which they had known their Lord, neither did He have the marks of the nails in His hands and feet, that they might thus identify Him. This was a different manifestation. They knew Him as did those with whom He walked to Emmaus, who recognized Him in the blessing of the bread, and not by His features or clothing or wounds. They recognized that none other than He could have performed such a miracle. They did not ask who He was; they felt a restraint; as we read, "None of them durst ask who He was," but all knew that He was the Lord.

"LOVEST THOU ME MORE?"

The stranger addressed St. Peter particularly, saying, "Lovest thou Me more than these" – these boats and nets, etc., pertaining to the fishing business? St. Peter answered, "Lord, Thou knowest that I affectionately love Thee." He used a word expressing fondness of love. Jesus replied, "Feed My lambs."

Then came the question a second time, "Simon, son [R5052 : page 208] of Jonas, lovest thou Me?" A great pressure was felt by St. Peter. Why did the Master so particularly question his love? Why should He put this question more to him than to the others? Was it because he had been the first of the disciples to suggest the resumption of the fishing business? Was he to blame for this? But he answered, "Lord, Thou knowest that I affectionately love Thee." Jesus this time replied, "Tend My sheep." For the third time Jesus said to St. Peter, "Simon, son of Jonas, *dost thou* affectionately love Me?" Here Jesus used the same word that St. Peter had used, as though He questioned the affection and depth of St. Peter's love. Ah! the third time must have sent the memory of St. Peter back to the scene in Caiaphas' Judgment Hall, when he denied his Master the third time, even with cursing. And now Jesus for the third time had asked him respecting his love and

whether it was really a love of affection! St. Peter's choking reply was, "Lord, Thou knowest all things! Thou *knowest* that I affectionately love Thee!" The Lord's reply was, "Feed My sheep."

In harmony with these words of the Master to St. Peter the chief work of His followers has been to minister to the needs of the spirit-begotten *sheep*. It is in full harmony with this that St. Paul, addressing the Elders of Ephesus, counseled that they "feed the *flock of God*, which He had purchased with the blood of His own Son." There is a point here that perhaps is too frequently overlooked. If all of the Lord's followers could realize that the message to St. Peter is the same as comes to all of us, perhaps it would make a change in most of our preaching.

OUR MISTAKEN METHODS

Have not Christians in general overlooked this important lesson, namely, that the chief work of the ministers and under-shepherds of the Lord's flock during this Age is to "*feed the flock*"? Is it not true that comparatively *little* feeding is being done? On the contrary, the thought usually received by new converts is, Now you are saved; go, evangelize, and bring others to Christ – especially bring money, for with plenty of it we can convert the world. Work for Jesus by soliciting funds for church expenses, extension, etc., etc.

If the inquirer has thoughts or feelings is it not too often the case that his instructors know not how to answer them, but merely say, "Stop thinking, and go to work"? Alas, that this is so true! The "*lambs*" should be *fed* until they become "*sheep*." The *sheep* should be *tended*, cared for, guided, instructed, and the sheep should also be *fed* with the stronger meat than that which the lambs could appropriate. St. Paul gives this thought when on one occasion he urges his hearers to desire "the sincere milk of the Word that they may grow thereby."

But few seem to copy the great St. Paul in respect to their methods. Few seem to realize and apply to themselves the Master's words to St. Peter, "Feed *My lambs*," and "*My sheep*." As a consequence, the Church of Christ is in a languishing condition. Many, sincere at heart, know not what they believe. Many would find it impossible to follow St. Peter's admonition, "Be ready to give a reason for the hope that is within you, with meekness and reverence." – I Peter 3:15.

REASONS FOR THE NEGLECT OF THE DOCTRINES OF CHRIST

There are two reasons which have led up to the neglect of "the doctrines of Christ" – the teachings of the Bible. These two reasons fully explain why so many are telling new believers, Never mind the doctrines of Christ, but go out and convert somebody.

The first of these reasons is the erroneous thought which gained ascendancy during the Dark Ages, namely, that from Pentecost until the second coming of Jesus is the time allotted by the Heavenly Father for the world's conversion, and that this is the commission which He gives to His people, and if the world be not converted the responsibility for their eternal torture will fall upon His people.

All of this is a mistake. Not a word of Scripture tells that the Church was commissioned to convert the world before the second coming of the Lord. Quite to the contrary, the Scriptures show that at the Lord's second coming the world will be unconverted. The Apocalypse particularly tells us that when the Lord at His second coming shall establish His Kingdom, the nations will be **[R5053 : page 208]** angry and Divine wrath will come upon them, thereby introducing the great "time of trouble" with which this Age is to end, according to the prophetic Word.

These testimonies do not signify that holiness will perish, nor that all of the Lord's people will be unfaithful, but they do signify that the

world in general will not be the Lord's people; they will still be enemies, Gentiles, unconverted. Nor are we urging that the Church has nothing whatever to do with the world. Quite to the contrary; while she has not been given the mission of converting the world in the present Age – while that work remains for her to do in the coming Age in connection with the Lord and His Kingdom – nevertheless she was commissioned to do a work of *witnessing* in the present Age.

The Church's witness was to be the telling of the Message of God's grace to those having an ear to hear, although they be but few. Secondly, she was to witness to the world by her faithfulness to the principles of righteousness, and thus to show forth the praises of Him who called her "out of darkness into His marvelous light." But this witnessing was not in order to the converting of the world, but in order to gather out of the world the number necessary to complete the Divinely foreordained elect Bride of Christ.

THE SECOND REASON

As the first error was in respect to the world's conversion to the Lord, the second error was in respect to *what would happen to the world* if they were not converted to the Lord. When the erroneous idea gained credence that everyone who does not accept the invitation and become a member of the Bride of Christ is to be eternally tormented, can we wonder that it led many good people to a frenzy of error respecting what should be done to save their families and neighbors and the heathen millions from a supposed eternity of torture?

It was because of this supposed urgency that those coming to a belief in Jesus were exhorted *not to stop to feed* and to grow strong in the Lord and to study His Word, but to be moved by a frenzy of zeal to bring others to the Lord. This frenzy in turn led to most unreasonable teachings and practices, which we are only now gradually getting rid of as we realize that a great mistake was made.

How strange that we did not stop to think of the absurdity of our position and how it misrepresented the Heavenly Father, in a most detestable light! How strange that any should ever think that when the Heavenly Father sent out the call to those who have the hearing ear, to joint-heirship with Jesus Christ their Lord, He would consign to eternal torment any who would decline to accept the *admittedly stringent rules and conditions* appertaining to this "call" – the "narrow way" of the footsteps of Jesus – self-denial, etc.!

Well do the Scriptures assure us that the saints [R5053 : page 209] "wrestle not with flesh and blood merely," but rather "with wicked spirits in high positions" of influence. (Eph. 6:12.) Well does the Apostle tell us that it is the God of this Age who hath blinded the minds of those who believe not; that he is preventing the light from shining unto them. (2 Cor. 4:4.) Well can we see how he put light for darkness and darkness for light during the Dark Ages.

ANOTHER LESSON WE MAY LEARN

We must not leave the text without calling to memory a most wonderfully instructive lesson concerning the proper way to reprove and rebuke our brethren when the same is surely necessary. So far as the record shows, the three inquiries which our Lord made of St. Peter respecting his love for Him were the only rebukes ever given him as an offset, or punishment for his shameful denial of the Master on the night in which He was betrayed.

Had many of us been in the Master's place we would have felt that it was necessary to make St. Peter very humbly apologize before we would have anything further to do with him. We would have been inclined to speak of his weakness, of his ingratitude, of how he knew better, etc., etc. Our sense of justice would, in many instances, have entirely overshadowed our sense of mercy and sympathy. But not so with the Master. He knew the loyalty of St. Peter's heart. He knew that he had already gone out and wept bitterly over the matter. He knew what a sense of shame would be upon him and how much courage it

would mean for him to think at all of meeting the Master whom he had denied.

Surely it was on account of this sympathy for St. Peter and this appreciation of the tendency he would have to become entirely discouraged that led our Lord to mention St. Peter first amongst the Apostles on the morning of His resurrection, saying to Mary, to whom He first appeared, "Go and tell My disciples, and Peter" – don't let Peter think that he is an outcast. Let him know that I think of him and love him and sympathize with him and have forgiven him, because I know he did it under stress.

WE SHOULD COPY THE MASTER'S METHODS

And if our Lord and Master has set us such an example of benevolence and forgiveness without request, how are we learning this lesson? To what extent do we forgive others their trespasses and to what extent do we go more than half way to let them know that we harbor no resentful feelings toward them? To what extent do we send them word that we think of them kindly, generously? And when the appropriate time comes and it is proper for something to be said can we not take a lesson from the Redeemer's loving forbearance and gentleness in His merely asking the erring one if he had a proper kind of love, and when he confesses special love, then to ask him if he is *sure* that he has the *special love*?

No doubt our success as the Master's servants in feeding the brethren, the flock, and helping instead of hindering them, will be in proportion as we remember and copy His style and methods. So, then, while feeding His flock, let us have continually before us the great Shepherd's example of how the flock should be dealt with.

