

THE CALL TO FOLLOW

SERIES: PETER'S PROGRESS

By Danny Hall

In the summer of 1971 I was eighteen, just out of high school, and getting ready to go off to college. I had spent my whole life growing up in the Bible-Belt Christianity of the south, and I had grown weary of it. I looked around at the people in our church, and for the vast majority, I couldn't tell that it made any difference whatsoever in their lives. So I'd grown pretty cynical about Jesus, and I wasn't sure the gospel mattered at all. I was looking forward to getting out and on to the next stage of life where I could explore things that *I* was interested in.

Now, my church was a very traditional place, which was very much a reflection of the culture, but the people in the church weren't really all spiritually dead. And that summer before I went away to college, no matter how hard I tried to avoid people who were excited about Jesus—and I really did try—I kept running into them! But toward the end of the summer, somebody somehow got me to a prayer meeting. I went partly out of curiosity, and partly because my girlfriend at the time was dying to check this stuff out. At this prayer meeting, God began to open my eyes in new and different ways, and the way he did that was through the lives of the people there. They were my age or a little older, and they were totally excited about their relationship with Christ. They talked about the way God was working in their lives and changing them. For the very first time, I began to see the wonder and the beauty of God's presence in people, how he was changing them and revealing himself to them in his word.

Throughout the history of the church, one of the most powerful witnesses to the glory of God and the truth of Christ has been his presence and work in his people, how he moves into a life and changes it, and then grows that life up in his grace. Certainly, we have the word of God, which speaks profoundly and directly to who God is and to our need for him. But it's often through the powerful testimonies of Christ's living in people's hearts that we are confronted with who he is in new and different ways.

In this series of nine sermons we're going to take a look at one person's story. This story is a glorious combination of being both Scripture and the telling of one person's progress as God takes him from place to place and grows him up in Christ. We're going to study the life of the apostle Peter. I have a very hard time calling him "the apostle Peter," to be honest, because when you first encounter Peter, he doesn't look much like apostle material! But that's the good news, because after all, he's very much like us. We're going to be tracing the journey that Peter takes all the way from fishing for a living to leading the church. Peter's story is ultimately a story about Jesus' life and work in him. Peter calls himself a sojourner and a pilgrim, so I've entitled this series *Peter's Progress* as we look at what God does in his life. In this message we're going to begin with one of the early encounters between Jesus and Peter in Luke 5.

Before we read that passage, let's consider who Peter is. We know, as I said, that he's a fisherman. He has grown up in Galilee. He has a brother, Andrew, and together they are in business with John and James, the sons of Zebedee, who are also Galilean fishermen. Now, growing up in Galilee was sort of like growing up in the country for us. Peter grew up in a small town, probably in Bethsaida, and now lives in Capernaum. If you were a sophisticated Judean from up in Jerusalem, you'd look at the Galileans and think they were hicks. Peter even has an accent (which will later identify him when he is following the trials of Jesus and trying to not be noticed), like someone from the Deep South. He's not

particularly educated. Beyond that, he's very impulsive (he may even have ADD).

Then Jesus walks into his life. Luke 5:1-11:

One day as Jesus was standing by the Lake of Gennesaret [the Sea of Galilee], with the people crowding around him and listening to the word of God, he saw at the water's edge two boats, left there by the fishermen, who were washing their nets. He got into one of the boats, the one belonging to Simon, and asked him to put out a little from shore. Then he sat down and taught the people from the boat.

When he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, "Put out into deep water, and let down the nets for a catch."

Simon answered, "Master, we've worked hard all night and haven't caught anything. But because you say so, I will let down the nets."

When they had done so, they caught such a large number of fish that their nets began to break. So they signaled their partners in the other boat to come and help them, and they came and filled both boats so full that they began to sink.

When Simon Peter saw this, he fell at Jesus' knees and said, "Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man!" For he and all his companions were astonished at the catch of fish they had taken, and so were James and John, the sons of Zebedee, Simon's partners.

Then Jesus said to Simon, "Don't be afraid; from now on you will catch men." So they pulled their boats up on shore, left everything and followed him.

Let's look at how this story flows.

Obedience to the revelation of Jesus

First, consider the setting. Jesus is in the early part of his ministry. He has already performed some miracles and has begun to teach, and he's gaining a following. There are crowds everywhere he goes. Now in the region of Galilee he's down by the seashore. The phrase "crowding around" literally means "pressing in." That term means the crowds are pressing right up against him. It's the same word that is used for the way the stone was rolled over the entrance of the tomb of Jesus. They're all over him. Peter is nearby, washing his nets. Jesus sees his boat there, gets into it, and asks him to put out away from the shore a little bit. So Jesus gets a little space between him and the crowd, and then he begins to teach them.

Now, the text doesn't tell us what Jesus is teaching. Other texts from this period of Jesus' life reveal that he teaches a lot about how the kingdom of God is now present among them. He is beginning to slowly but surely reveal who he is, the promised Messiah. He will steadily reveal more and more over time.

At some point he ends his teaching and starts a personal conversation with Peter that will change Peter's life. He tells him to put out into deeper water and drop the nets again. Now, Peter is a professional fisherman. He knows these waters; he's probably been fishing them since he was a small boy. This is his life. He has fished all night long and has caught absolutely nothing. He is weary. But his response gives us amazing insight into where he is in his relationship with Jesus. Peter looks at him and says, "Lord, I've been doing this all night long. I've put these nets down over and over and over again, and I haven't

caught a thing. There are no fish here. But because you say so, I'll do it." What Peter is doing is responding to what he has already begun to know about Jesus.

There are other stories that are similar to this one. In Matthew 4:18-22 and Mark 1:16-20 Jesus initially comes to the seaside, sees Peter and Andrew and James and John, and asks them to follow him. He says, "Come, follow me, and I will make you fishers of men." A lot of people think this is just another telling of that, but I don't think so. The surrounding circumstances are different, and I think we see in Peter's response here that he has already begun to follow Jesus a little bit. When Jesus asked him to leave his nets and follow him, he did. Immediately before this episode, Luke tells us that Peter actually took Jesus to his home, and Jesus healed his mother-in-law. So Peter already has a relationship with Jesus. He has heard him teach, he has seen these miracles, and he has gotten a little glimpse of who Jesus is. So when Jesus says, "Drop the nets into the water," Peter's response is simply, "Okay, Lord, I don't know what this is about, but because you asked me, I will do it."

This is so important in understanding our own spiritual progress. God simply wants us to respond with a heart of obedience to what he has revealed to us about himself. Now, that's going to grow over time. Jesus doesn't tell Peter what the whole story is going to be. Can you imagine how Peter would have responded if on that first day by the seashore in Matthew 4 and Mark 1, or on this occasion a short time later in Luke 5, Jesus had told Peter where this whole thing was going? This small-town fisherman is ultimately going to end up in Rome (not even Jerusalem) dying as a martyr. But God in his mercy understands that we're a work in progress. His revelation of himself and of what he calls us to do increases over time.

Back in the summer of 1971, if God had told me that my first step of faith was going to lead me to California, what would I have done? "Lord, please, not California!" Ginger and I used to laugh. She's from the small town of Muddy Creek, South Carolina. There have been times when God has taken us places, and we've looked at each other and said, "What in the world is a girl from Muddy Creek doing here?" One of those was a dinner in the ambassador's home in Vienna, Austria. God doesn't lay all that out in the beginning. What he does is give us something of himself and ask us to respond in obedience.

That's exactly what Peter does as he puts the nets down. He trusts in what he has understood about Jesus up to this point.

Fear and grace

What happens? An incredible, miraculous catch! I would love to see the expression on Peter's face when he first tugs on that net. "Whoa! What's happening here?" He starts to pull it in, and he can't even handle it, it's so much. He hollers to his partners and the other boat comes out. They end up filling up two whole boats full of fish. Jesus demonstrates his power over something that Peter thought he knew all about.

Do you see what's happening in Peter's life? Jesus is revealing a little bit more of himself. Peter has had a taste of who Jesus is, and now Jesus wants to take him a little bit farther down the road. He opens himself up a little bit more and all of a sudden shows that he's the Lord of everything, including the thing that Peter knows best. You see, Peter has seen other miracles, but this miracle is a very personal one for him, because it's about fish, and he thought he knew everything about fish. "Okay, I don't know anything about healing, but fish I know. Wait a minute... maybe I don't really don't know fish. Here's the Lord of the fish, the Lord of everything." So what is Peter's response now? He finds himself flat on his face in front of Jesus, begging him to leave: "I'm not worthy."

All the way through Scripture, when God begins to reveal himself to people more and more, we find that one of the initial responses is that people end up on their faces. Think back to Isaiah 6:1-5. Isaiah goes into the temple, and God gives him a vision of his grandeur. He sees the Lord high and lifted up, and winged seraphs flying above him and worshipping. Isaiah ends up flat on his face: “Woe to me! I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips....” At the end of the Bible in the book of Revelation, when John sees Jesus in all his glory, he ends up flat on his face (Revelation 1:17). As we recognize the greatness and grandeur of God, this is an appropriate response, because the Scriptures teach that the beginning of wisdom is the fear of the Lord (Psalm 111:10; Proverbs 9:10).

But notice what happens after that. Jesus then speaks to Peter, prostrate before him, and what does he say? “Do not fear.” In every instance in Scripture when God pulls back the veil and asks people into his presence, overwhelms them with his majesty and wonder and glory to the point where they’re bowed down in worship and fear and awe, which is right where they ought to be, then he looks at them and, in his incredible grace, he says, “Do not fear.”

The theme of fear is important in Luke’s gospel. Seven different times Luke records some revelation of the majesty and power of God after which God speaks in some way and says, “Do not fear.” The first is when the angel Gabriel appeared to Mary and called her to be the one who would carry the Son of God in her womb. He looked at Mary and said, “Do not be afraid....” (Luke 1:30.) Next, on the Judean hillside, the shepherds were blown away by the angelic chorus and announcement of Christ’s birth, terrified by the overwhelming majesty of God, and God’s voice came out: “Do not be afraid....” (Luke 2:10.) And there are five other times in the gospel of Luke when the wonderful invitation of grace simply says, “Do not fear,” including this incident in Peter’s life.

Leaving everything to follow Jesus

The second part of Jesus’ call is this: “From now on you will catch men.” Notice the difference between this call and the one he gave in Matthew 4:19 and Mark 1:17. There he said, “I will make you fishers of men.” The miracle that he has just performed for Peter is an amazing illustration of what he wants to do with Peter’s life. “I’ve called you to follow me. I’ve told you that I will make you a fisher of men. Now I have demonstrated to you physically with actual fish that I can use you to catch men!” There’s a progression in God’s revelation of himself. This miracle stands as an object lesson. Just as Jesus fills those nets beyond comprehension with fish, he’s saying to Peter, “If you will follow me and trust me, you will be someone through whom I will continue to bring in the harvest of souls, catch the people that I’m going to put into your life. I’m going to do what I promised to do. You can trust me to accomplish it.”

So now what does Peter do? It says he pulls the boat up on shore, leaves everything, and follows Jesus. In Matthew 4 and Mark 1, it says, “They left their nets and followed him.” Here it says they leave *everything* and follow him.

What does this story have to do with you and me? Let me suggest some ways for us to be thinking about it. First of all, we are to respond to the revelation of who Jesus is. It’s important for us to understand that. That’s what obedience is all about. It’s our starting point for knowing what it means to be his followers. For far too many of us, what we do is follow some pattern that we think is the right way to live as a Christian. That’s not totally incorrect; there are things we ought and ought not to do as followers of Christ. But when that’s our focus, we end up getting trapped into following human traditions, as has happened throughout history. We become mostly concerned with conforming to what we think is the right thing to do. But to be a true follower of Jesus, we have to respond to the revelation of who Jesus is. Our worship and service have to flow from there. So it’s important for us to keep Jesus himself in the forefront of our thinking, to more and more get to know him and understand who he is,

and then out of that to be willing to respond to his call in worship and in service.

The second principle I want us to learn from Peter is that this whole process is progressive, and that it is repetitive as needed. It doesn't happen all at once. We see in Peter's life that he had a call to leave his nets, in some measure he began to follow Jesus, he had Jesus at his house to heal his ailing mother-in-law; and now this is another step in the progression. If we go to the end of Jesus' story in John 21, after the resurrection, we find Jesus back on the beach with Peter, who has fished all night without catching anything. He tells him to let down the nets again, and once again the catch is so great that they can't haul it in (John 21:1-14). Some New-Testament scholars have concluded that these accounts are too similar to be different incidents, and that the writers just made up some parts as needed to fit the story into the different settings. But this is what I think is happening: Even after the resurrection, Jesus has to say to Peter, "Don't forget where you started. I'm still the Lord. I still call you a baby. I'm still going to give you fish." God graciously continues to give us more and more of himself, a deeper understanding of him, that we might obey him at deeper and deeper levels of who we are.

Finally, we have to prayerfully consider what it means then to "leave everything." In Peter's case, he leaves the security of home. As I said, he's a small-town guy. Except for pilgrimages he has probably made to Jerusalem, I doubt if Peter has ever gone very far away from home. My guess is that he is most comfortable around the water, boats, nets, fish, and his family. But now Jesus has said, "Follow me," and Peter leaves everything. As I said, he doesn't know where he's going to end up, but one day he will die a martyr's death for his Lord. Before that there will be many places and adventures and challenges, some of which we're going to look at in this series. But it begins by his saying, "I'm willing to leave the security of home." He also leaves the security of his occupation. How is he going to earn a living? We know he is married, although we don't know anything about his family—how is he going to take care of his family if it isn't by fishing? But he walks away from it to follow Jesus. He leaves the security of the known for the unknown. He has no idea what he's hitching his wagon to at this point; he just knows that Jesus is worth following.

What does it mean in our own experience to leave everything? How much of our lives are tied up in trying to create some sort of human-level security and comfort? Jesus bids us to be willing to leave everything. We can respond by making decisions about how we will live based on kingdom values, trusting God with our future, our children, our service.

In my own life I've been meditating on how I am to leave everything. God has really been hitting me hard on this issue. I have to yield to him even how he is going to use me. I have dreams and ideas, and then I get very selfish. I wish the elders would make some decision, or I wish everybody would want to do church the way I want to. Wouldn't we all be okay if we did what *I* wanted? Even as a pastor and a leader in this church, I have to confront the reality that so much of what I want may just be about me, about what's comfortable for me, about how I want God to use my gifts. I want to set the agenda even for how I serve the Lord. So perhaps God is calling me to leave all those aspirations as I follow him, trust him with the gifts he's given me. He is saying to me, "I'll use your gifts. I gave them to you. You can trust me with that."

In all areas of our lives, from our service in the church to the care of our children, from the desire to be married to the desire for our marriages to be better, the desire for our job to work better and for some sense of financial security, on and on, the call of Christ is to trust. The very essence of being a follower of Jesus is to believe that it's worth it, that is, that he can care for us, and that he can ensure what matters in our lives. As Jesus' call to Peter was to leave everything, you and I have to humbly come before the Lord and seek to understand what he is doing in our lives.

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Luke 5:1-11

First Message

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