

John 21:15

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

So when they had dined, Jesus saith to Simon Peter, Simon, son of Jonas, lovest thou me more than these? He saith unto him, Yea, Lord; thou knowest that I love thee. He saith unto him, Feed my lambs.

Analysis

Jesus' threefold questioning of Peter—'Simon, son of Jonas, lovest thou me more than these?'—addresses Peter's threefold denial. The Greek text contains a significant interchange: Jesus asks 'lovest thou me' using ἀγαπάω (agapaō), the highest form of love—selfless, sacrificial, divine love. Peter responds 'thou knowest that I love thee' using φιλέω (phileō), meaning affectionate friendship. In the third question, Jesus shifts to Peter's word: 'lovest thou me' (φιλεῖς με/phileis me), meeting Peter where he is. The question 'more than these' (πλέον τούτων) is ambiguous—it could mean 'more than these other disciples love me' (recalling Peter's boast, 'Though all men shall be offended because of thee, yet will I never be offended,' Matthew 26:33), or 'more than these boats and fishing gear' (Peter had returned to his former occupation). Either way, Jesus probes Peter's devotion. Peter's response 'thou knowest that I love thee' (σὺ οἶδας ὅτι φιλῶ σε) appeals to Jesus' omniscient knowledge rather than making bold claims. The shift from Peter's earlier self-confidence to humble appeal to Christ's knowledge indicates growth through failure. Jesus' commission 'Feed my lambs' (Βόσκει τὰ ἀρνία μου) restores Peter to ministry. True love for Christ necessarily produces care for Christ's people. The threefold restoration matches the threefold denial, healing Peter's guilt and confirming his apostolic calling.

Historical Context

This encounter occurred on the shore of the Sea of Galilee (Sea of Tiberias) after Jesus' resurrection. Peter and six other disciples had spent the night fishing unsuccessfully. At dawn, Jesus appeared on shore (unrecognized initially), instructed them to cast their net on the right side of the boat, and they caught 153 large fish. Recognizing Jesus, Peter swam to shore while the others brought the boat in. Jesus had prepared breakfast—bread and fish on a charcoal fire. This charcoal fire (ἄνθρακιᾶν/anthrakian) echoes the charcoal fire where Peter warmed himself while denying Jesus (John 18:18). Jesus deliberately recreated the setting where Peter failed, transforming it into a place of restoration. Peter's denial had occurred in the high priest's courtyard during Jesus' trial. When confronted, Peter cursed and swore 'I know not the man' (Matthew 26:72, 74). This public failure devastated Peter, who wept bitterly (Luke 22:62). Though Jesus appeared to Peter privately after the resurrection (Luke 24:34, 1 Corinthians 15:5), this beach conversation provided public restoration before fellow disciples. The commission to 'feed my sheep' appointed Peter to pastoral leadership, fulfilled when he preached at Pentecost (Acts 2), led the Jerusalem church, and wrote epistles instructing believers. Early church tradition held that Peter was eventually crucified upside down in Rome under Nero (AD 64-68), requesting this manner of death as he felt unworthy to die as his Lord died. Jesus' prediction 'when thou shalt be old... another shall gird thee... and carry thee whither thou wouldest not' (John 21:18) foreshadowed Peter's martyrdom.

Related Passages

1 John 4:8 — God is love

John 15:13 — Greatest form of love

Psalms 19:1 — Heavens declare God's glory

Colossians 1:16 — All things created through Christ

Study Questions

1. What is the significance of Jesus' threefold questioning matching Peter's threefold denial?
2. How does the shift from agapaō (Jesus' question) to phileō (Peter's answer and Jesus' final question) reveal Peter's growth from brash confidence to humble honesty?
3. What does Jesus' command to 'feed my sheep' teach about the relationship between loving Christ and caring for His people?
4. How does Jesus' restoration of Peter after catastrophic failure encourage believers who have failed or denied Christ?

Interlinear Text

Ὅτε	οὖν	ἡρίστησαν	λέγει	τῷ	Σίμων	Πέτρῳ	ὁ	Ἰησοῦς
when	So	they had dined	He saith	G3588	Simon	Peter	G3588	Jesus
G3753	G3767	G709	G3004		G4613	G4074		G2424
Σίμων	Ἰωνᾶ,	ἀγαπᾷς	με	πλεῖον	τούτων	λέγει		
Simon	son of Jonas	lovest thou	me	more than	these	He saith		
G4613	G2495	G25	G3165	G4119	G5130	G3004		
αὐτῷ	Ναί	κύριε	σὺ	οἶδας	ὅτι	φιλῶ	σε	λέγει
unto him	Yea	Lord	thou	knowest	that	I love	thee	He saith
G846	G3483	G2962	G4771	G1492	G3754	G5368	G4571	G3004
αὐτῷ	Βόσκει	τὰ	ἀρνία	μου				
unto him	Feed	G3588	lambs	my				
G846	G1006		G721	G3450				

Additional Cross-References

Romans 15:1 (Parallel theme): We then that are strong ought to bear the infirmities of the weak, and not to please ourselves.

1 John 4:19 (Love): We love him, because he first loved us.

Isaiah 40:11 (Parallel theme): He shall feed his flock like a shepherd: he shall gather the lambs with his arm, and carry them in his bosom, and shall gently lead those that are with young.

1 Peter 1:8 (Love): Whom having not seen, ye love; in whom, though now ye see him not, yet believing, ye rejoice with joy unspeakable and full of glory:

Acts 20:28 (Parallel theme): Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock, over the which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers, to feed the church of God, which he hath purchased with his own blood.

Ephesians 6:24 (Love): Grace be with all them that love our Lord Jesus Christ in sincerity. Amen.

1 John 5:1 (Love): Whosoever believeth that Jesus is the Christ is born of God: and every one that loveth him that begat loveth him also that is begotten of him.

Jeremiah 3:15 (Parallel theme): And I will give you pastors according to mine heart, which shall feed you with knowledge and understanding.

John 16:27 (Love): For the Father himself loveth you, because ye have loved me, and have believed that I came out from God.

Ezekiel 34:23 (Parallel theme): And I will set up one shepherd over them, and he shall feed them, even my servant David; he shall feed them, and he shall be their shepherd.