

John 21:18-19
An Assurance of Triumph

Introduction

We saw last week that Peter was a man of bold “action,” as well as a forthright man who spoke his mind. We saw, also, that Peter was characterized by a “sincere” self-confidence. He was confident in the strength of His own devotion to Jesus. So when Jesus said to the disciples, “You will *all* fall away because of Me this night,” Peter answered:

- Matthew 26:33 (cf. Mk. 14:29) — “Even though all may fall away because of You, **I** will never fall away.”

In John chapter 13 Peter said to Jesus:

- John 13:36–37 — “Lord, where are You going?” Jesus answered, “Where I go, you cannot follow Me now; but you will follow later.” Peter said to Him, “Lord, why can **I** not follow You right now? **I** will lay down **my** life for You.”

It’s this self-confident spirit that Jesus challenged when He said to Peter in the Garden of Gethsemane:

- Mark 14:37 — “Simon, are you sleeping? Could you not keep watch for one hour?”

And it was this self-confident spirit that was proved to be so empty when Peter denied Jesus *three* times.

Last week we saw the infinitely wise, and tender, and gracious way in which Jesus restored and recommissioned Peter. *Three times* Jesus asked Peter, “Do you love Me?” and *three times* Peter responded, “Yes, Lord; *You know* that I love you”; Yes, Lord; *You know* that I love You”; “Lord, *You know* all things; *You know* that I love You.” There’s no more self-confidence here. Peter confesses his love for Jesus while at the same time submitting that love to Jesus for His recognition and His validation. “Yes, Lord; I do love You, but it doesn’t matter in the end what I say I know; it only matters what You know.” “Yes, Lord; You know that I love You because in the face of my complete and total failure, You have loved me.” *Three times* Jesus invited Peter to publicly profess his love for and his devotion to Jesus — something that in himself Peter must have felt wholly unworthy to do. After graciously inviting Peter to profess publicly what he could never have dared to profess publicly on his own initiative, Jesus then commissioned him and bestowed upon him the most sacred trust possible—*three times*: “Tend *My* lambs... shepherd *My* sheep... tend *My* sheep.” Obviously, Jesus doesn’t do this because of some innate worthiness or fitness that He sees in Peter. Why, then? At one level all we can answer is: Because of Jesus’ own sovereign and gracious choice. At another level we can answer: Because Peter has come to see how unworthy and unfit he is, and so—at the same time—he has come to possess the only true worthiness for service in Christ’s kingdom.

“Tend *My* sheep,” Jesus said to Peter. And then He continued:

I. John 21:18a — “Truly, truly, I say to you, when you were younger, you used to gird yourself and walk wherever you wished;”

The ESV says, “when you were young, you used to *dress* yourself” (cf. NIV; NLT). But the meaning is more precise than that. The Greek verb “to gird” (*zonnyo*) is related to a noun (*zone*) which generally refers to a kind of belt (cincture) or to something that’s wrapped or tied around oneself (cf. Job 12:18; e.g. a rope [Isa. 3:24] or a sash [Rev. 15:6]). We could bring out the connection between the Greek verb and noun [*zonnyo* and *zone*] by using the English words “gird” and “girdle.” In the Bible, to gird oneself is often by extension to dress oneself, but it specifically includes “the fastening [or tying] of one’s belt as the final act in dressing” (Louw-Nida).

- Exodus 29:8–9 (LXX; cf. Isa. 3:24) — Then you will bring forward Aaron’s sons, and you will clothe them with tunics. And you will **gird** [*zonnyomi*] them with **girdles** [*zone*].
- Psalms 108:19 (LXX) — Let [his curse] be to him like a garment with which he is clothed, and like a **girdle** [*zone*] with which he **girds** [*zonnyomi*] himself.

In Bible times, of course, they didn’t wear pants. They wore loose fitting tunics or outer garments or robes that needed to be tied up or secured so as to be less cumbersome and allow for freer movement; so these garments needed to be girded on with a belt/girdle (LXX: Joel 1:8; 2 Sam. 20:8; 1 Chron. 15:27).^{*} This helps us to make sense of what John says Peter did when he heard that it was the Lord who had called to them from the beach: “He girded [on] his outer garment... and cast himself into the sea” (Jn. 21:7). “Truly, truly, I say to you, when you were younger, you used to **gird** yourself **and walk wherever you wished.**” Jesus’ emphasis isn’t primarily on dressing, but on the final securing of the garment with a belt or girdle for the greater ease of getting to wherever Peter wants to go. Peter girded himself *in order that* he might walk wherever he wished.

All this is important because it will help us understand why Jesus is using this otherwise strange figure of speech. “Truly, truly, I say to you, when you were younger, you used to *gird* yourself and *walk* wherever you wished...”

II. John 21:18b — “...but when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands and someone else will gird you, and bring you where you do not wish to go.”

There’s a play on words here. In the first half of the verse we see a young Peter girding himself so that he can walk with more ease wherever he wishes. In the second half of the verse we see an older Peter being “girded” by someone else—not this time in the usual sense of having his outer garment secured with a girdle or rope-like belt for ease of travel, but rather in the sense of having his outstretched hands bound (girded about with a cord or rope [cf. NRSV; HCSB; NET; NCV])—and then being *brought* where he does *not* wish to go. And where will Peter be taken? Into exile? To prison? To death? The tone of Jesus’ words points not just to imprisonment (which

^{*} The expression “gird your loins” referred to gathering up the loose folds of a garment that hung below the knees and then *tying* or tucking them into one’s *girdle* to allow for even *freer* movement (Jer. 1:17; 2 Kings 9:1; Nah. 2:1; Job 38:1-3).

might only be temporary), but to the end of Peter's earthly life by execution and martyrdom. So we read in verse nineteen:

III. John 21:19a — Now this [Jesus] said, signifying by what kind of death [Peter] would glorify God.

We know Jesus was signifying at least a martyr's death (in whatever form, whether stoning, or beheading, etc.), and this much Peter would have understood. It's possible that Jesus was signifying a martyr's death by crucifixion in particular, and this Peter may or may not have understood at the time. In this case, the picture would be of Peter's hands being stretched out and tied to his own crossbeam and then being made to carry that crossbeam on his shoulders to the place of his crucifixion (the place where he did not wish to go). At the time the Apostle John was writing down these words, it would seem that Peter had already suffered a martyr's death by crucifixion under the emperor Nero (if the early tradition is to be trusted). So John is writing these words now with the benefit of 20/20 hindsight (and perhaps assuming this knowledge in his readers as well).[†] Again, we can't be sure that Jesus was speaking specifically of crucifixion, and we can't be sure that if He *was* speaking of crucifixion, Peter would have understood this at the time.

What seems most significant is that Jesus doesn't say, "When you grow old, your hands will be stretched out," but rather, "When you grow old, *you* will stretch out your hands." This seems to be a picture of willing submission — of Peter willingly stretching out his own hands and allowing himself to be brought where he does not wish to go. So now we can make sense of why Jesus uses this figure of speech in the first place. In other words, why not say more simply and more clearly: "One day you will suffer death for the sake of My name," or even, "One day you will be crucified for the sake of My name"? Why, instead, does Jesus use this "elaborate" metaphor?

"*Truly, truly, I say to you, when you were younger, you used to gird yourself and walk wherever you wished.*" Can you hear in these words a reference to Peter's previous self-determination and self-confidence? We think of when Peter girded on a sword (cf. 1 Sam. 17:39; 25:13; 2 Sam. 20:8; Neh. 4:18) and of when he drew that sword and struck the slave of the high priest and cut off his ear. Here is Peter, in his youth, girding himself and "walk[ing] wherever *he* wished." He was willing to lay down his life for Jesus by fighting to the death; but then Jesus told him: "Put the sword into the sheath; the cup which the Father has given Me, shall I not drink it?" (Jn. 18:11). And that's when all of Peter's courage left him and he denied Jesus three times. It was like the rug had been pulled out from underneath his feet. He was willing to gird himself for hand-to-hand combat and lay down his life for Jesus fighting to the death, but he was not willing to stretch out his own hands and have someone else "gird" him; he was not willing that someone else should *bring him* where *he* did not wish to go.

That was Peter in his youth. But when Peter grows old, Jesus says, then he *will* stretch out his own hands and someone else *will* gird him, and bring him where he does not wish to go. Is this bad news? Or is this good news? Or what kind of news is this? This isn't just a gloomy and

[†] The tradition that Peter requested to be crucified upside down because he wasn't worthy to die in the same manner as Jesus died is probably just a fanciful legend.

morbid prediction of the kind of death Peter will die. It's an assurance of the triumph Peter will win. The old Peter who girded himself so that he could go wherever he wished and who then denied Jesus three times is replaced with the new Peter who willingly submits without resistance or violence to a martyr's death for Jesus' sake. How do we account for this transformation? The only possible answer is the powerful working of God who always completes in us the work that He begins. We remember the prayer of Jesus in Luke:

- Luke 22:31–32 — “Simon, Simon, behold, Satan has demanded to sift you all like wheat. “But I have prayed earnestly for you [Simon], that your faith may not fail; and you, when once you have turned again, strengthen your brothers.”

These words in John are not a gloomy prediction of the kind of death Peter will die, but rather an assurance of the ultimate triumph that Peter will win, as he will “*glorify God*” even in his death.

But still, isn't there something of a “downer” in these words? One commentator writes: “What is remarkable is that Peter lived and served three decades with this prediction hanging over him” (Carson). At one level, I can perhaps understand what this commentator is saying. Peter didn't take any pleasure in the thought of suffering and death. He didn't look forward to it. Jesus says that he'll be brought where he does *not* wish to go. At a purely human and fleshly level, this is a prediction that would hang over one's head. The old self-confident and self-determined Peter couldn't have borne it. The old Peter would have fallen into despair and been paralyzed with fear. But this isn't the old Peter any longer. This isn't the Peter who girds himself so that he can walk wherever he wishes. And so rather than being a prediction that hangs over his head, for Peter this is the assurance of his triumph. Previously, Jesus had foretold a self-confident Peter's failure (you will deny Me three times), now Jesus foretells something very different; now Jesus foretells a humbled Peter's triumph (you will glorify God by meekly dying a martyr's death). Can we imagine the comforting assurance that this must have been for Peter?—Not the prospect of dying, but the promise and the hope of persevering in faith and devotion to his Lord even *unto* death.

What is it that comforts us most? Is it the hope of a life of ease (and/or militantly “going down in a blaze of glory” as perhaps in the case of the old Peter) or is it the promise and the hope of persevering in faith — of persevering in devotion to our crucified and risen Lord even in the midst of whatever sufferings may come and even unto death? It's Peter who will write some thirty years later of sufferings and trials resulting in the proof of our faith, which faith, he says, is “more precious than gold” that perishes (1 Pet. 1:6b-7a). Indeed, Peter says that it's this faith, “even though... tested by fire,” that will be “found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ” (1 Pet. 1:7b). What is it, then, that comforts us most? The hope of a life of ease (or militantly “going down in a blaze of glory”) or the promise and the hope of persevering in faith even in whatever sufferings may come and even unto death?

IV. John 21:19b — *And when [Jesus] had spoken this, He said to [Peter], “Follow Me!”*

Those introductory words, “And when [Jesus] had spoken this,” emphasize the fact that what Jesus says next (“follow Me”) is connected with what He's just said. It's on the basis of this assurance of ultimate triumph that Jesus now calls Peter to follow Him. It's upon the ground of

this assurance that Peter *will persevere* in faith and devotion even unto death that Jesus now *calls* Peter to *persevere* in following Him. Whereas before Peter’s “following” (cf. Jn. 1:43) partook of self-reliance and self-confidence, now Peter’s “following” is to be rooted only in faith and in God’s saving and preserving grace. And so it’s Peter who will write some thirty years later “to those [residing] as exiles” in the world:

- 1 Peter 1:5 — **[You] are protected by the power of God through faith** for a *salvation* ready to be revealed in the last time.

Self-reliance is replaced with full dependence upon God. Self-dependance is replaced with trust in *God’s* almighty power and all-sufficient grace. Even as Jesus prayed earnestly for Peter, that his faith would not fail, we know that He also prays for us (Rom. 8:34; Heb. 7:25).

- John 17:11, 15 (cf. 17:20) — “I am no longer in the world; and yet they themselves are in the world, and I come to You. Holy Father, keep them in Your name, the name which You have given Me, that they may be one even as We are... I do not ask You to take them out of the world, but to keep them from the evil one.”

We can strive diligently to follow Jesus knowing that it is God who assures the final outcome and who promises to complete in us the work that He begins (Phil. 1:6; 2:12-13).

On the one hand, it’s upon the ground of Jesus’ assurance of Peter’s ultimate triumph that Jesus now calls Peter to follow Him. On the other hand, we can turn it around and say that it’s Jesus’ call to *follow Him* that explains how this triumph is to be achieved. Before, Peter girded himself and walked wherever *he* wished, following after a Jesus that he believed he could serve with the sword; now, Peter is called to walk not wherever *he* wishes, but in the path that Jesus Himself has already walked, following in His footsteps. That’s what Jesus means when He says, here at the end of John’s gospel, “Follow Me” — “Follow Me” on the path that I have walked, the path that I Myself have pioneered, the path that leads now through suffering and death to resurrection life and glory (cf. Ridderbos; Jn. 12:23-26).

Remember this exchange between Peter and Jesus on the night of Jesus’ betrayal:

- John 13:36–38 — Simon Peter said to Him, “Lord, where are You going?” Jesus answered, “Where I go, you cannot **follow** Me now; but you will **follow** later.” Peter said to Him, “Lord, why can I not **follow** You right now? I will lay down my life for You” [I will fight to the death for You.] Jesus answered, “Will you lay down your life for *Me*? [No, I will lay down My life for *you*.] Truly, truly, I say to you, a rooster will not crow until you deny Me three times.

Peter couldn’t follow then because he still couldn’t accept the fact that Jesus was walking down a path of suffering, determined to drink the cup that the Father had given Him to drink. But Peter will follow later, after he has come to understand the redemptive nature and power of Christ’s sufferings and death for him and in his place. This is what changes everything for Peter. *Then* Peter will follow Jesus on the path that He has already walked. *Then* Peter *will* be willing to stretch out his hands and go where he does not wish to go — because while he won’t wish for

suffering and death, he will rejoice to follow Jesus and to come, in the end, where He has gone, and to share, in the end, in His resurrection life.

What is it that rejoices our hearts more? Is it the hope of a life of ease (and/or militantly “going down in a blaze of glory”) or is it the thought of following Jesus on that path that He has pioneered and coming, in the end, where He has gone, and sharing, in the end, in His resurrection life? It’s Peter who writes some thirty years later to those still residing as exiles in the world:

- 1 Peter 2:20–21 (cf. vv. 22-24; 1 Pet. 3:14-18) — ...if when you do good and suffer for it, you endure, this finds favor with God. For to this you have been called, since **Christ also suffered for you**, leaving you an example that you should **follow in His steps**.
- 1 Peter 4:13 (cf. vv. 12-16; Acts 5:29, 33, 40-42; 1 Pet. 5:8-10) — ...to the degree you are **sharing the sufferings of Christ**, keep on rejoicing, so that also at the revelation of His **glory** you may rejoice with exultation.

The path that Jesus has pioneered is the path that He now walks with us by His Spirit, leading the way as we follow in His steps. And so it’s these two simple words—“*Follow Me*”—which guarantee that the word about Peter’s death is not at all a gloomy “prediction hanging over his head,” but an assurance of ultimate triumph and of fellowship with Jesus all along the way (cf. Phil. 3:10). This is why some thirty years later, it’s Peter who will be able to write with such confidence and peace:

- 2 Peter 1:13–15 (cf. 2 Tim. 4:6) — I consider it right, as long as I am in this earthly dwelling, to stir you up by way of reminder, knowing that the laying aside of my earthly dwelling is imminent, as also our Lord Jesus Christ has indicated to me. And I will also be diligent that at any time after my departure you will be able to call these things to mind.

Here at the end of John’s gospel, Jesus can say to Peter—and ultimately to all of us: Follow Me! Follow Me on the path that I have walked, the path that I Myself have pioneered, the path that leads now through suffering and death to resurrection life and glory.