

“Lovest Thou Me More than These?”

*“Simon, son of Jonas,
lovest thou me more
than these?”
—John 21:15*

ACCORDING TO THE
Gospel record, Jesus
appeared five times to
various ones of his fol-

lowers and disciples during the first eight days which followed his resurrection. Then, possibly for a few weeks, no additional appearances are recorded. During this time, the disciples would likely have discussed among themselves their situation. Their hopes and prospects of the Messianic kingdom perhaps became somewhat vague and indistinct as the days and weeks passed.

Evidently Jesus' delay in giving another post-resurrection appearance was for the purpose of testing the faith of his followers, especially the eleven remaining apostles, and to prepare them for receiving additional, important lessons. After they waited for some time in Jerusalem with no more appearances of Jesus, the apostles may have then recalled the words he spoke the night before his

death, after they left the upper room and walked to the Mount of Olives, when he said to them, “After I am risen again, I will go before you into Galilee.” —Matt. 26:30-32

The apostles may have also remembered the message which an angel of the Lord had given at the tomb on the day of Jesus’ resurrection to Salome, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James. The angel had said to them, “Be not affrighted: Ye seek Jesus of Nazareth, which was crucified: he is risen; he is not here ... But go your way, tell his disciples and Peter that he goeth before you into Galilee: there shall ye see him, as he said unto you.” (Mark 16:6,7) Thus, it is reasonable to conclude that the next appearance of Jesus to his disciples is that which is recorded as taking place at the “sea of Galilee,” also known as the sea of “Tiberias.”—John 6:1; 21:1

As men in the prime of life, the apostles must have felt that they should be engaged in some worthwhile activity, rather than continuing to remain idle. During his ministry, Jesus had called several of them from their fishing nets to be “fishers of men,” and they had left all to follow him. (Matt. 4:18-22; Luke 18:28) However, Jesus had died, and was subsequently raised from the dead on the third day. He was now a spirit being, whom they could not physically see most of the time. From their limited perspective, things had changed after Jesus’ death and resurrection. They may have wondered, “What should we preach?” or “How can we tell others of our hopes in our king who has been crucified, and although he has risen, he cannot be physically seen by others?”

A RETURN TO FISHING

According to the scriptural record, seven of the apostles, under the leadership of Peter, determined to reenter the fishing business. (John 21:2,3) This was one endeavor in which they had experience. As had probably been their previous custom, after dark they took their boat to go fishing, "and that night they caught nothing." This was the very circumstance Jesus was waiting for. He wished the disciples to reach the extremity of thinking and reasoning on the matter of his resurrection and what they should do now, in order to prepare them for the lessons he was about to give.

On this occasion, when the apostles reengaged in the fishing business, the time had come for the risen Lord to demonstrate two things. First, he desired that the apostles know he had a further mission for them to perform in connection with "fishing for men," which they had not yet accomplished. Second, Jesus wanted to demonstrate to them that the divine power he had prior to his death and resurrection, and which had provided for their necessities during the three and one-half years of his ministry, was still his and would be exercised in their interest if they continued to obey him.

It is important to notice that although Jesus, resurrected as a spirit being, could not be seen most of the time by the disciples during the forty days prior to his ascension, he could hear and see them. Therefore, all the disciples' plans, arrangements and discussions among themselves were fully known to him. By miraculous power, exercised in some manner unknown to us, the risen Lord hindered fish from going into their nets that night. Not

knowing the true situation, the disciples were likely quite disappointed.

Here is a lesson for all of the Lord's people. We do not know, at times, what is for our best, spiritual interest. Certain things which we may want and desire to grasp, considering them to be good, might really be to our disadvantage spiritually. Blessed are they who are able, by faith, to pierce the gloom of every trial, difficulty and perplexity, realizing that "The Lord knoweth them that are his," and that "all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose."—II Tim. 2:19; Rom. 8:28

THEY TOILED ALL NIGHT

In the dawn of the morning, Jesus appeared to the disciples as a stranger standing on the shore of Galilee. He called out to them and inquired if they had any fish. From the boat they replied that they had toiled all night and caught nothing. Then the stranger suggested they cast their net on the other side of the ship. Although such a suggestion must have seemed foolish to a group of experienced fishermen, they did as the stranger suggested. Immediately their net filled with a large number of sizeable fish, so much that even these seven strong fishermen were unable to draw it into the boat and were obliged to drag it ashore.—John 21:4-6,8,11

The apostle John, the "disciple whom Jesus loved," was the first to reason that this stranger on shore was, in fact, the resurrected Jesus. He said to Peter, "It is the Lord." Peter, whose heart was no doubt still burning as he remembered his own weakness in denying his Lord three times during

Jesus' last night on earth, could not wait for the boat to take him to the shore. Instead, he immediately jumped into the water and swam to shore as fast as he was able, to have another opportunity to see and speak with Jesus. When the other disciples reached the shore with their net full of fish, they found not only Jesus, but also some bread and fish cooking over a fire. (John 21:7-9) Thus, the first lesson for the disciples was the reassurance that they were still under the Lord's care and supervision.

Jesus then said to them, "Come and have breakfast." The disciples ate with their Lord and Master, whom they recognized not by his physical appearance, nor by seeing nail marks on his hands and feet, but instead by the miracle which he had just performed. "None of the disciples dared ask him, Who are you? They knew it was the Lord." (vs. 12, *English Standard Version*) Although the rest of the conversation the apostles had with the Lord while eating together is not reported, John recorded the important words which Jesus addressed to Peter following the meal.

PETER WISELY AND GENTLY REPROVED

Jesus questioned his beloved disciple, addressing him not by his new name, Peter, but by his old name, "Simon, son of Jonas." (John 21:15) Perhaps it was an intimation to Peter that he had not manifested in the last few weeks the rock-like qualities implied in his surname "Peter," because he had chosen to leave the work of the Gospel and instead pursue again the fishing business. Jesus' first question to Peter was most pointed. Referring to the boats, nets, and other things related to the fishing trade, the Lord asked, "Lovest thou me

more than these?” In essence Jesus was questioning Peter, “You started out to be my disciple, but what place do I have now in your heart? Is it still essential for you to serve God and preach the Gospel, or is it more important to go back to fishing?”

Peter’s answer was prompt, “Yea, Lord; thou knowest that I love thee.” Jesus then responded, “Feed my lambs.” That is, take care of my little ones instead of pursuing the fishing business. Then Jesus asked a second time the same thing, “Simon, son of Jonas, lovest thou me?” Peter gave the same reply and our Lord responded, “Feed my sheep.” Give your thought, attention, and care to them, rather than to the fishing business.—vss. 15,16

Jesus then asked Peter a third time, “Simon, son of Jonas, lovest thou me?” Peter “was grieved” with being asked a third time, “lovest thou me?” It seemed to imply doubt on the Lord’s part, and perhaps the third time this question was asked, it reminded Peter that he had denied Jesus three times. It touched a very tender spot in the apostle’s heart. We may be sure this was not done by our Lord, even in this delicate manner, with any intent to injure or discourage Peter, but rather for the purpose of helping him. Peter’s confession this time was even stronger: “Lord, thou knowest all things; thou knowest that I love thee.” Jesus again said to him, “Feed my sheep.”—vs. 17

AGAPAO AND PHILEO LOVE

The words translated as “lovest” that Jesus used in his questions to Peter on these three occasions were not the same each time. In the New Testament there are two different sets of Greek words which

are all often rendered by the English word “love” in many translations of the Bible. One set is comprised of the words *agape* [noun] and *agapao* [verb], and the other set consists of *philadelphia* [noun] and *phileo* [verb]. When Jesus questioned Peter the first two times, he used the verb *agapao*, which means to love in the highest sense—the strongest and purest love, a selfless love. However, the third time Jesus questioned Peter he used the word *phileo*, which denotes the manifestation of love in the sense of affection, brotherly kindness, and friendship, much like the feelings one has for family and close friends.

Peter, in all three of his answers, used the word *phileo*, thus declaring his personal affection and friendship toward Jesus. Perhaps, because of his denial three times in knowing the Master and his decision to return to the fishing business, Peter refrained from claiming the highest love, *agapao*, which our Lord used in his first two questions to him. This might be an indication of Peter’s humility, after having denied knowing the Lord three separate times. If so, then Peter had learned an important lesson, no longer to boast about his own strength and confidence, but rather to be aware of his weaknesses. Jesus’ use of the word *phileo* the third time he asked the question especially grieved Peter. By changing the word, Jesus may have implied, “Peter, are you sure that you have even an affectionate or brotherly love toward me?”

PHILADELPHIA LOVE ILLUSTRATED

Love, as denoted by the words *phileo*, or *philadelphia*, can be thought of as that type of love

which is given in the hope of receiving it in return. As such, it may have the tendency toward the seeking of one's own interest. One example of this kind of love is that which is exercised by a parent toward a child, and the child toward a parent. Such a love is, of course, quite proper and needful. However, it can sometimes be based on, to some degree or another, self-interest. A scriptural example of this is found in these instructions of Jesus to his followers: "He that loveth [*phileo*: have affection for] father or mother more than me is not worthy of me: and he that loveth [*phileo*] son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me." (Matt. 10:37) Jesus' point in these words was that, while affectionate love toward our family members is indeed appropriate, it must not exceed our love for him, else we can never follow him faithfully as "overcomers."

Another lesson Jesus gave concerning *philadelphia* love is: "He that loveth [*phileo*] his life shall lose it." (John 12:25) Indeed, it is our privilege to love life, in the sense of appreciating it and being unwilling to destroy it or waste it foolishly. However, those who have become followers of Christ and who have pledged to walk in his footsteps, even unto death, realize that they have already surrendered their human life. They have exchanged it for the hope associated with the transformation of their heart and mind to become like Jesus. If faithful unto death, this high, heavenly hope will be realized, and they will receive the divine nature as a spiritual being. (Rom. 2:7; Rev. 2:10) We are no longer to be controlled by *philadelphia* love toward earthly life, but instead must strive to develop *agape* love, a

selfless love which makes us willing, yea even glad, to lay down our life in the service of God. In this regard, the Apostle Peter exhorts us to add to “brotherly kindness” [*philadelphia*], the highest form of love, *agape*, which does not seek its own interest.—II Pet. 1:7

AGAPE—SELFLESS LOVE—ILLUSTRATED

The love which God had in providing for mankind’s redemption from sin and death was not *phileo*, because he had not wronged mankind when the sentence of death was pronounced upon Adam and all his subsequent posterity, due to his disobedience. Mankind, likewise, did not do anything for the Creator which would have put him under obligation to love mankind in return. Instead, God’s love which provided for our redemption was *agapao*, or *agape*, selfless love. As we read in John 3:16, “God so loved [*agapao*] the world, that he gave his only begotten Son.” The Apostle Paul also describes God’s love for the human race, writing: “God commendeth his love [*agape*] toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.”—Rom. 5:8

The kind of unselfish love which God exemplified is that which he sets before us as the highest standard or “mark” toward which we must develop, if we would gain the heavenly prize. This perfect standard is impossible for our fallen human flesh, but is attainable by our renewed minds, wills and hearts. It is expressed well in the words: “Thou shalt love [*agapao*] the Lord thy God with all thy heart, ... soul, ... strength, and ... mind; and thy neighbour as thyself.”—Luke 10:27

The objective of God's instructions, training and correction is to transform our character into his likeness, as represented by this word *agape*. "The goal of this command is love, which comes from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith." (I Tim. 1:5, *New International Version*) "God is love; and he that dwelleth in love dwelleth in God, and God in him." (I John 4:16) Every appearance of the word love in these verses is from the Greek *agape*.

MANY CHARACTERISTICS OF AGAPE

In the Apostle Paul's wonderful discourse on *agape* love, he describes its many facets. (I Cor. 13:1-13). In these verses the Greek word *agape* is referred to as "charity" in the *King James Version*. However, in nearly all other translations, it is more properly rendered "love." Paul begins by explaining that *agape* love "suffereth long"—that is, it exercises forbearance and patience. (vs. 4) Elsewhere, he writes that we should "be patient toward all."—I Thess. 5:14

In another place, Paul points out Abraham as a great example of patience and longsuffering, stating, "After he had patiently endured, he obtained the promise." (Heb. 6:15) We recall that Abraham waited twenty-five years before God's promise was fulfilled that his wife Sarai would bear him a son. (Gen. 12:1-7; 17:19; 21:1-5) This was just one example of the many manifestations of patience and longsuffering in the life of this faithful one of the Old Testament. The Apostle Peter tells us that God is "longsuffering to us-ward, not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance."—II Pet. 3:9

Returning to Paul's words in I Corinthians chapter 13, he continues by saying that *agape* love is kind. (I Cor. 13:4) Jesus explains that God "is kind unto the unthankful and to the evil." (Luke 6:35) Thus we see that kindness and mercy are important aspects of the selfless love which descends from God, and which is shown by his plan to redeem mankind from sin and death.

Agape love "envieth not," in other words, it is not jealous. It "vaunteth not itself," or as the *J. B. Phillips New Testament* reads, "is neither anxious to impress" others. (I Cor. 13:4) In harmony with this, Jesus pointed out that such a love will not motivate his true disciples to do alms, pray, or fast in order to be seen by others. (Matt. 6:1,2,5,16) Paul states further that *agape* love is "not puffed up," that is, proud. Earlier in his epistle the apostle admonishes: "That no one of you be puffed up for one against another. For who maketh thee to differ from another? and what hast thou that thou didst not receive?"—I Cor. 4:6,7

Additionally, Paul tells us that *agape* love "doth not behave itself unseemly," and "seeketh not her own" interests. Rather, it is interested and concerned for those beyond just ourselves and our close circle of family and friends. (I Cor. 13:5) Furthermore, this unselfish love "is not provoked." (*Revised Version*) In other words, it does not become irritated, nor bad-tempered. Instead, such a love makes allowances for the weaknesses of others and thereby is forgiving of others, just "as Christ forgave" us. (Col. 3:13) It is also a love which "thinketh no evil." One possessing such a love will not suppose or "surmise" evil about others.—I Tim. 6:4

PRACTICAL EXAMPLES

Agape love “rejoiceth not in iniquity,” injustice, unrighteousness; but instead “rejoiceth in the truth.” (I Cor. 13:6) One practical example of “rejoicing in iniquity” is participating in gossip or idle talk about others, which oftentimes results in damaging, or possibly even destroying, their reputation. Even if we are only a listener to gossip or idle talk, we are still, to that extent, a party to such wrong behavior. Gossip is an “iniquity,” an injustice, because those being talked about are usually not present and therefore unable to defend themselves. Such conversations, often falsely considered innocent “information sharing,” are usually destructive in nature and, therefore, should be considered as unrighteous behavior. The Scriptures are clear in warning us against this practice.—Lev. 19:16; Prov. 26:20,22; II Cor. 12:20; Eph. 4:29; I Pet. 4:15

Let us, rather, strive to daily put into practice the words found in the Psalms, to “set a guard” over our mouth and “keep watch over the door” of our lips. (Ps. 141:3, *NIV*) The psalmist also wrote, “Blessed is the man that walketh not in the counsel of the ungodly, nor standeth in the way of sinners, nor sitteth in the seat of the scornful,” but instead, finds that “his delight is in the law of the LORD; and in his law doth he meditate day and night.”—Ps. 1:1,2

Finally, the Apostle Paul says that *agape* love “beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things.” (I Cor. 13:7) Such all-encompassing love does not have restrictions. It is not love which merely pays back in return for

what someone has done for us, nor is it a love which waits for someone else to love us first. It is completely selfless, without any conditions or “strings” attached. A love that bears, believes, hopes and endures “all things” in accord with God’s character and plan is indeed the highest form of love.

JESUS’ WORDS TO PETER

On the morning when our risen Lord was on the shore of Galilee, he gave the following prophecy to Peter, “Truly I tell you, when you were younger you dressed yourself and went where you wanted; but when you are old you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go.” (John 21:18,19, *NIV*) These words seem to indicate that Peter would die by crucifixion when he was old. Most importantly, it meant that Peter had not been rejected by the Lord, but on the contrary, would have the privilege to suffer for the truth, and for the cause of Christ. After Jesus spoke these things, he then said these final words to Peter, “Follow me,” which he did, faithfully, to the end of his life.

Just as Peter did, let us also develop reliance upon God’s wisdom in all of our experiences, even on occasions when we may not understand why God has permitted certain things to come upon us. We may rest assured of God’s love, wisdom, and power. (Rom. 8:28) Let us trust God, even when we cannot trace him, and be “content: ... for he hath said, I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee.” (Heb. 13:5) May the sentiments of our heart and mind be like the words of the well-known hymn:

He leadeth me, O blessed thought! O words with
heav'nly comfort fraught!

Whate'er I do, wher'er I be, Still 'tis God's hand
that leadeth me.

Sometimes 'mid scenes of deepest gloom, Some-
times where Eden's bowers bloom,

By waters still, o'er troubled sea, Still 'tis his hand
that leadeth me.

Lord, I would clasp thy hand in mine, Nor ever
murmur or repine,

Content whatever lot I see, Since 'tis my God that
leadeth me.

And when my task on earth is done, When by thy
grace the vict'ry's won,

E'en death's cold wave I will not flee, Since God
thro' Jordan leadeth me.

He leadeth me! He leadeth me! By his own hand
he leadeth me.

His faithful foll'wer I would be, For by his hand
he leadeth me.

—*Hymns of Dawn*, #87, "He Leadeth Me"

Let us daily apply to ourselves the question which
Jesus asked Peter, "Lovest [*agapao*, selfless love]
thou me more than these?" May we likewise increase
our efforts to develop this highest form of love by
demonstrating in our daily life each godlike quality
outlined by the Apostle Paul in I Corinthians, chapter
13. Finally, let us continue to cultivate a close, per-
sonal fellowship with our Heavenly Father and
with our Lord and master Jesus Christ, which will
enable us to make this affirmative statement, that
we love them both more than lands or houses,
boats or nets, parents or children, husband or wife,
or self.—Ps. 45:10,11; Matt. 10:37-39; 19:27-29 ■