

The Most Important Question

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[0 : 00] Brilliant. Thanks, guys. And we trust and we pray that God would bless the reading of his words to our benefit and his glory. Emerson, guys, you've disappeared already. There we go. Folks, come with me to John 21.

This is where we're going to be today. So let me encourage you to have these verses open in front of you. Let me make an observation about our lives. Our lives are full of questions, aren't they? They're full of questions. We get little questions in our lives. See if you click with any of these. We get the times when we ask, what time is the bus? What time is the bus? Did you keep the receipt? Did you ask that one over the last few weeks? Did you keep the receipt? What time do the shops open? What's for dinner? What shall we watch? Did you pay that bill? Did you remember to set up that direct debit? We get these little questions in life. And then at times in our lives as well, we get the big questions in life. I know there's big questions that we get. Will you marry me? Will you come work for us?

[1 : 08] Shall we move area? Will we move house? We get these big questions in life. We'll probably get a big one this year, I'm sure, as well, that we got at the end of last year. Who will you vote for?

We get these big questions in life. In fact, while we're there, I wonder, in your heart of hearts, think to yourself, last year as you look back on it, what was the single most important question that you were asked last year? It's a big question, right? Get in your mind. What was the single most important question that you were asked last year? And then come with me to John chapter 21, and let me introduce you to the most important question that you and I will be asked this year.

So come with me to John 21, and we get this question in the context of this conversation that Jesus has with this man, Peter. And here's the question that Jesus asked him really simply, verse 15, if you've got it there on the screen. Simon, which was his name prior to meeting Jesus, Peter, that's the name that Jesus gave him, meaning rock. What does he ask him? Do you love me?

There's the question, do you love me? And it's not a particularly complicated question. I mean, if you're somebody who's interviews people, you get in trouble for asking this kind of question because it's a closed question, right? You can only answer it yes or no, really. It's not a particularly complicated question, but here's the thing. It's a massive question. It's a defining question. It's the kind of question that says, what is your life all about? It's a cracking question to ask ourselves. The Lord Jesus would ask us as we step into another year.

And if we're to understand why it's such a big question, we've got to get inside this man, Peter's life, and get to understand him a little bit. You see, this guy, Peter's been following Jesus for something like three years. At this point in the story, in John's gospel, right at the end, he's witnessed some incredible stuff. He's witnessed some miracles. He's heard teaching, and he's never heard anything like it. He's seen the crowd's reaction. They're astonished and amazed at Jesus's words that no one has ever taught with authority like this man.

[3 : 21] And he's witnessed the reactions of the crowd good, and he's witnessed the bad as well. He's witnessed those who walked away and wanted nothing to do with Jesus. In fact, if you look earlier in John's gospel, John chapter 6, we get this episode where this crowd have gathered to hear Jesus' teaching. And Jesus, at the end of his teaching, he's calling on them to respond to him and put their faith in him. And the crowd look at each other and say, who can accept this teaching? And one by one, they begin to fade away. And Jesus turns to his 12 who are still there, and he asks them directly, are you going to go as well? And who's at the steps forward? It's Peter. And he says those words, which are utterly incredible. He says, where else will we go, Lord? Where else are we going to go?

Because you have the words of eternal life. And then fast forward a little bit in John's gospel, we also get the episodes where Jesus says he's going to go to the cross, and Peter says, no, I'm going with you. I'm going with you. And Jesus says, no, you're not. Right? Three times that cock is going to crow, and you're going to deny me each time. And the thing is that Peter, as he watches Jesus go to the cross, he's sitting, standing by a charcoal fire. He's witnessed Jesus go, and what happens? Are you one of them? Are you with him? No, I'm not. Again, he's asked, are you with him? No, I'm not. Are you with him? No, listen, I'm not with him. And in the cock rows, just like Jesus said, it would. John's gospel, Jesus dies for the sin of the world, of his people. And he rises, God installs him as this heaven's glorious king, seated in God's holy hill. And Jesus appears to his disciples. And again, he appears to them in this episode in John 21, and they're having breakfast together. And they have this conversation with one another. The risen Lord Jesus with his 12. There's 11, I guess, at this point. And here's the conversation. Here's the context in which he asks this question. Now, think about this for a minute, okay? If you were Jesus at this point in the story, what would you be tempted to do or ask? Right? Got a weird sense of humor. Here's what I would have done if I was Jesus, right? Every time somebody asks me a question around that charcoal fire, around that fire when I'm having breakfast,

I would have been tempted to answer, cock-a-doodle-doo, and scratch my ear with three fingers and just glare at Peter, right? And just repeat the exercise again and again and again to kind of, do you remember that? Right? Who's laughing now? But thank goodness that Jesus is not like us. Okay? He's not like us. It's not what he does. Here is Peter, and here is him being asked three more questions around a fire. Quite deliberate, I think. Jesus trying to get this three times denial in Peter's mind, and then Jesus trying to get this three times denial out of Peter's heart. Here is Jesus doing some deep soul work in the life of his chosen servant.

You know, we always talk about, don't we? We talk about the question behind the question. You got that one before? Right? What's the question behind the question? What's really going on here? Jesus asked him, do you love me? Here's what I think the question behind the question is, is, do you know who I am? Do you get it? Do you understand what I have done for you? Peter, do you understand, rest in this, that I am the one, we were singing it earlier, I am the one who chose you. Right? I am the one who has served you. Remember that episode where you tried to wash my feet, and I said, no, no, no, no, you don't understand what's going on. I need to wash you. I've died for your sin on the cross. I've taken the wrath of God that you deserved on me. I am the one who's died for you. I am the one who has loved you. I am the one who intercedes for you. I am the one, as Neil prayed earlier, who holds you, who keeps you, and I am the one who teaches you.

[7 : 40] That's who I am, Peter. That's who I am. I am the one, as John said at the beginning of his gospel, I am the one in whom is found grace and truth. And you have to say Jesus' response is so counter-instinctive to us, do you not? Right? So counter-instinctive. I find this as a parent, so often the words out of my mouth, right? See, when the girls have done something that I told them not to do, and it happens exactly as how it said it would be done, right? When doors get slammed and fingers get caught in the door, right? Do you know the first words out of my mouth aren't, come here and have a hug. First words out of my mouth so often are, I told you that would happen.

I told you that would happen. I'm so thankful as I reflect on this, that Jesus is not like me. He's not like us. You know, I remember the company that I worked for before starting here, I had to log every seven minutes of my day, right? Every seven minutes of my day, who I worked for, how long, what case I worked on, who the client was, how long I spent in it. And at the end of the year, what would happen is I used to get your yearly review, and at your yearly review, you sat around the table with two of the partners and slam, you got a document slammed in front of you, and that was your key statistics for the year, right? And based on your key statistics, you got a good, you got an okay, or you got a could do better. And I was thinking this week, praise God that Jesus isn't like a boss who slaps my spiritual statistics on the desk in front of me at the end of this year.

You know how long I've prayed, how much I've read my Bible, how I've served his people, my evangelistic attempts, and he slams it in front of me, and he gives me a rating, and he says, why did you not do better? Why did you not do better? Because where would we be, friends? Where would we be if that was the case? Where would we be if he was this kind of saviour? You know, particularly those times in life, like we read that reading from Isaiah 42, the description of who this Jesus will be, that a bruised reed he will not break, a flickering flame he will not blow out. Those times in life when you and I are fragile, tearful, doubting, and delicate, and those times in our lives

where we're on the floor and we're out of resources, that he doesn't stoop to condemn, that he stands by to lift up, that Jesus Christ is a strong saviour who is never in the business of doing anything other than unfailingly loving his people. I love the old hymn by Annie J. Flint. You can google her story if you want, a woman who went through incredible suffering. She wrote this in the old hymn, his love has no limits, his grace has no measure, his power no boundary known unto men, for out of his infinite riches in Jesus he giveth and giveth and giveth again.

Jesus asked Peter, do you understand who I am? Isn't it interesting that given the role that Jesus knows that Peter's going to play in the capital C church from this point on, that the last conversation that these two have before he ascends to heaven is not 10 ways to grow your church, right? It is not five steps to a successful and happy life.

It is not the seven most strategic cities to reach if Christianity is to go global, right? You go to our bookstores, you will find tons of books like that. That's the conversation we've been tempted to have. But Jesus has the conversation, wants to base in Peter's mind, establish that he loves them. Because when all else fades in Peter's life, when all else goes, Jesus wants him to know that he loves them. Grace, forgiveness, wholeness, newness. All things given to Peter and all things given to those ever since who by faith have become children of God, who have trusted Jesus as their Lord, King, and Savior, given to us by the Savior who loved us first and served us first as he gave himself for us. Now this time of year, you know, there's a word that's front and center in all of our minds. TV clock with this one, right? And it's the word do, right? Anyone made New Year's resolutions, we've all made them, right? We all love this game. I think as we look out in 2020, right? I heard somebody describe it as the year of the optician, which I thought was quite funny, right? Year 2020. Some of you will get that, some of you, right? Looking out in the year 2020, thinking what's our lives going to be about this year? What are we going to do this year? Some of us will say, right, we're going to exercise more. Some of us will have said we're going to eat better.

[12:30] Great things, right? For some of us, we'll have had faith-related resolutions that we want to do, right? We want to read our Bibles more. We want to serve in the church more. We want to attend things more. We want to pray more. Cracking things, folks, really good things, but they are things that we most likely will fail at.

And this passage invites us, before we attempt to do, to grasp the done. In other words, before we talk about what we will do for Jesus, it seems to me that Jesus here is way more concerned about the answer to the same question that he asked Peter all those years ago. Do you understand who I am?

Do you love me? Right? Do you love me? Yeah. I was thinking about it. Somebody tweeted this week, and I thought it was a wonderful thing as a parent to say, I want my girls to know that I'm way more excited about Jesus this year than I am about football. And the Lord Jesus excites me more than a goal does, right? So what we want, Jesus says, do you love me? Maybe you're not a Christian here today, and I want you to know that you will not find a love like this anywhere, right? Christmas is a wonderful time for many. Recognize that it is a really difficult time for many others. As we've gone back into situations where we've met brokenness and hurt and death and pain, and we come away thinking that was anything other than Hollywood told me it would be. And yet here is a Savior, here is a King who stands and offers you himself today. He's one who has loved you and given himself for you, if but you would come to him and receive forgiveness. Maybe you're here today and you're a Christian. Let me ask you, is your soul deeply, deeply, deeply satisfied with the deep love of Jesus?

[14:27] Are you resting in that love that he has for us? That God's love for us is not based on our performance. God's love for us is based on the fact that we are found in his Son, and because we are found in his Son, he loves us like he loves his Son. I do not need to qualify for that love. I do not need to perform for that love.

I simply, by faith, need to reach out to Jesus and accept that love as I become his adopted Son. You know, many of us will have used the famous Bible reading plan written by Robert Murray McShane, who was a Scottish pastor decades, years ago. And I love it. It's a wonderful Bible reading plan.

You get through the Bible in a year, but his heart in it, right, was for his congregation, that they would feed themselves daily on God's word. That God's spirit, as God's word was opened, and as we encounter the risen Jesus there, would feed our souls. His heart for his congregation was that they grow. And I love what he writes in the introduction. He writes this, That's what it's all about,

isn't it? We get stuck into the word as we know this God better.

We know him better. It's true, isn't it, that in our darkest times, we need our deepest theology. Who is this God? Who is he? Do you remember that song we used to sing at Sunday school?

Yes, Jesus loves me. Yes, Jesus loves me. Yes, Jesus loves me. How? Because the Bible tells me so, which I always want to add, and the cross proves it so. Yes, Jesus loves me. Friends, are you resting in that love today? You know, let me hit you with a radical thought, right? I've got all your attention with that. Radical thought. Maybe this year, some of us need to, New Year's resolution, maybe some of us here this morning need to do less and rest and know Jesus more.

[16:31] Jesus asked Simon, son of Peter, do you love me? And Peter says, you know I do, Lord. You know I do. And it's from that base that Jesus goes on to talk about how that love for him is going to express itself in Peter's life.

Right? Is it in passionate singing? No. Is it in fanatic reading? No. Is it in diligent serving? No.

According to Jesus, love for him will express itself in Peter's life in two very ordinary ways.

Here's the first one. By loving his people. Right? So when Jesus says to Peter, verse 16 and 17, if you've got it there, feed my lambs, shepherd my sheep. He's talking about his people.

Those who he loves. And just as a slight pause here at this moment, do you see how much Jesus loves his people? How much he loves his people? Those people that he purchased for himself by his blood at the cross. Jesus loves them. He loves you. And he wants Peter to care for his sheep. Look after them, provide for them, visit them, stoop beside them, listen to them, know them, love them, love them, all things that they have known as Peter follows the example of Jesus himself.

And so here's the pastoral equation. Love for Jesus equals love for his people. I remember reading that biography, I think it was last Christmas, I read it actually, of John Newton.

[17:56] John Newton was the English minister and author of the song Amazing Grace. And the people in his neighborhood saw how he just loved people, just loved people, to the extent that they gave his home a nickname. And I love this, right? They nicknamed his home and they called it the Asylum for the Afflicted.

As they saw how this guy just loved people. I mean, that is true biblical hospitality, isn't it? It's not dinner parties. It's hospital. Hospitality. There it is, right there.

Friends, I must say that some of the most encouraging stories I had from last year, as I reflected on a couple of weeks off in the year gone by, the ones that encouraged me most, the stories, are the ones that I heard of the behind-the-scenes visits, where many of you went and just visited and cared and loved people.

I didn't even know about it until somebody told me. So encouraging to see that. Where does that come from? That comes from a deep love for Jesus. Jesus says, feed my people, which I think particularly in the context is going to mean Peter bringing the sheep to the green grass that is the word of God and allowing them to eat and to live.

Right? As God's spirit brings the spiritual nourishment to the hearts of God's people through God's word. Feed my sheep with the word.

[19:25] Lead them there. This is the job of every pastor, every elder, to bring the word of God to bear in our lives. You know, I find it that the more that I go on in this job, every one-to-one that I do, I take my Bible, and I've found that the passages that I share with people aren't the textbook ones, right?

Not a doctor, not just like there's a prescription, there's a prescription, there's a prescription of a verse, right? It's the ones that have encouraged my soul that morning. The ones that I have nourished, that God's spirit has brought to bear in my own heart, and just bringing it, sharing it with somebody.

At the end of the day, just one sheep telling another sheep, look at the shepherd. But maybe that's something you could do as you meet together, as we meet together out with Sunday, maybe potentially on a Sunday, but out with Sunday, just bringing the word of God to bear in each other's lives.

Helping each other, pointing each other to the great shepherd. You see, love for Jesus in Peter's life is going to mean loving his people, and secondly, it's going to mean dying to self, carrying his cross. So Jesus tells Peter what the future was going to look like for him, verse 18, if we've got it there. So Peter is going to follow Jesus, speak for him, live for him. It will mean that he will be persecuted.

[20:42] His life will be cross-shaped. That's the end. What's Jesus talking about? John tells us, adds his own comment, verse 19, that this is about Peter's death. Church tradition tells us that

Peter probably died by crucifixion during the great fire of Rome in 64 BC.

That was his end. That was his life. To die to self, Jesus calls him to do here. It was a German pastor, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the man who was killed in the concentration camp in Germany for opposing Hitler.

He wrote this in his book, *The Cost of Discipleship*, really simply, when Christ calls a man, he calls him come and die. Certainly true for Peter.

And it's true for many Christians around the world today. We can just look up Joshua Project or Operation World, anything of that online. You'll see the statistics there. But for us who, by the kindness of God, live where we do, it's unlikely to mean death by crucifixion, but the call is exactly the same.

To die to self for the sake of following Jesus Christ, the pearl of great price. What does this mean? [21 : 57] Well, this is going to mean, I think, in our lives this year, making Jesus' agenda, our agenda, making his goals, his priority of making disciples, of taking the gospel to all nations, to all peoples, our goal.

Our own holiness, I say to people, it's going to mean saying no to things, it's going to mean saying yes to things, the things we look at online, how we talk about and view others, our ambitions, our projects, our homes, how we spend our money.

It's all of these things that God, by his Spirit, holistically transforms us, as those who have been given new hearts, as God's Spirit holistically transforms us more into the image of Jesus Christ, and as our whole lives increasingly begin to display his lordship over every area, because that's the essence of true discipleship.

And I was encouraged by these words of the Apostle Paul, I have been crucified with Christ, and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me, the life that I now live in the body. I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and who gave himself for me.

Jesus begins by asking Peter, do you love me? And you see how he ends, verse 19, by summoning him. And he says, follow me. You know, just as we close, let me just tell you about something I was up to over the holidays.

[23 : 29] We're back at my mom and dad's, and we went with the girls to the country park near where they live, and there was a forest in this country park with tons of fallen trees. And what we did, just to try and do a little bit of father-daughter bonding, what we did is, Chloe and I, I'm a four-year-old, we went into the forest and we started to build a den.

All right, do you want to see the den? Okay. Caveat, four-year-old, okay. Here's the den. All right. Classically, I've built that up way too much, haven't I?

But that's our den. It's the den that we built. The thing is, you don't see in the picture, that's our third attempt at doing the den. Right? Built. A different tree, first of all.

Build, build, build, build, build. Crash. Second time, build, build, build, build, build. Crash. And after two goes at this, and Chloe almost getting hit by the trees, the branches that were falling, we recognized that the key to this, and took this on myself as the responsible adult in this situation, right?

The key to this was finding a tree that could hold it. So the third time, we found a tree that was actually much better than the tree that we've been building at. And what did we do? Build, build, build, build, build. Stand.

[24 : 45] Now here's the thing as I look out on 2020. Increasingly, as you go on in life, you realize you don't have a clue what's going to happen, do you? You don't have a clue what's going to happen. The Lord does, and that's what our trust is.

He knows what's going to happen. We don't. But here's the thing that we do know. We live in a world that says, lean your life here. Okay? Trust these things.

Base your life on that relationship with that person. Base your life on the fact that you might get those grades to get that job. Base your life on the fact that you might get that promotion. Base your life on the fact that your kids might get into that school.

Base your life on the fact that you might get that promotion at work. And all these things, our wayward hearts are drawn to these things and we're tempted to lean the weight of our lives on these things that say it's safe to build here.

Friends, let me just say if that's you today and think about it on your life, we're all tempted to do this. Is that all these things, if that tree is not named Jesus, if you lean your life against it, one way or

another, it will fail you or it will fall from you.

[25 : 51] And here is the call of Jesus to Peter and to us to lean the whole weight of our lives on who he is.

The saviour who loved me and who gave himself for me. Christ, the sure and steady anchor of the soul. There is the most important question that you and I have to think about this year.

Do you love me? I stand amazed in the presence of Jesus the Nazarene and wonder how he could love me, a sinner condemned unclean.

How marvelous, how wonderful, and my song will ever be, how marvelous, how wonderful is my saviour's love for me.

let me pray for us, but maybe just in the silence of your own heart now, and as the spirit of God moves amongst us and puts maybe his finger on a few things in our lives today as we respond to the word, why don't we just have a moment of silence and let me just encourage you to bring your own prayers to God and then I'll pray.

[27 : 06] so loving father, we thank you for this reminder today of just how much you love us.

thank you father that we do not need to doubt that but we need to simply look to the cross and see the saviour who loved us and by the work of your spirit I pray that he would come and help us to know that love more in our lives and that that love that the Lord Jesus would never cease to thrill us and it would never cease to be conformed to his image and this is our prayer knowing that you hear us confidently because we pray in his name.

Amen.