

# CHRISTIAN GROWTH

8

## BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE

Matthew 16:15–18; Luke 2:40, 52; John 1:40–42; 21:15–19; Ephesians 4:11–16; Philippians 1:6, 9–11; 3:12–16; Colossians 1:9–11; Hebrews 6:1–3; 2 Peter 3:14–18

## A VERSE TO REMEMBER

[Jesus] said to him the third time, “Simon son of John, do you love me?” Peter felt hurt because he said to him the third time, “Do you love me?” And he said to him, “Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you.” Jesus said to him, “Feed my sheep.”  
(John 21:17)

Daily Bible Readings			
M	Jan. 19	Matt. 4:18–22	Grow by Following Jesus
T	Jan. 20	Deut. 7:7–11	Grow in Love for God
W	Jan. 21	Col. 1:3–6, 11–12	Grow in Spiritual Wisdom
Th	Jan. 22	Prov. 1:2–7	Grow in the Fear of the Lord
F	Jan. 23	Prov. 1:8–12	Grow in Discerning Good from Evil
Sa	Jan. 24	Phil. 3:10–16	Keep on Growing

## STEPPING INTO THE WORD

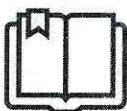
“Who’s your favorite biblical disciple?” The question was asked during an adult Sunday School class. “Not Judas,” the group agreed. John the Beloved disciple was suggested—the only one to stay with Jesus during his crucifixion. “Can we count the women?” someone asked. “If so, I choose Mary.” “Which one?” someone else asked, “Mary Magdalene, Mary the sister of Martha? Or Mary the mother of Jesus? She should count as a disciple.” The teacher asked the group to stick with the original twelve. There was some grumbling from the Mary contingent.

“Peter,” one piped up, “he’s the most relatable.” Others nodded. The group named some stories about Peter that they remembered: How he went from calling Jesus the Messiah in one breath, to disagreeing with Jesus about the future in the next (Matt. 16); how he tried to walk on water to get to Jesus, then sank when he got scared (Matt. 14); how he could get overly enthusiastic at times—wanting his whole body washed and not just his feet (John 13), and jumping into the sea to get to Jesus (John 21). “He’s a walking contradiction, just like us,” one said, “and Jesus loves him and calls him anyway.”

Peter is indeed a relatable model of discipleship. From his initial call to follow Jesus, to his struggle to understand how to do that, to his failure, forgiveness, and renewed call to

faithfulness by the resurrected Jesus, we are sure to find ourselves somewhere in his story. Like Peter and all who follow Jesus, we grow in our faith sometimes in spite of ourselves. We are met and called just as we are, but we are not left as we are. We try, fail, try again, and keep loving God and our neighbor, as Jesus invites us to do. This changes us. It changes the church. It changes the world. Thanks be to God!

*Lord, you call us to follow you. Help us keep trying, even when we fail. Give us the persistence of Peter. Strengthened by your forgiveness and faith in him, we place our faith in you. Amen.*



## SCRIPTURE

Matthew 4:18–20; 16:16–18;  
John 21:15–18; 2 Peter 3:14–15, 18

**4:18** As he walked by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea—for they were fishers.<sup>19</sup> And he said to them, “Follow me, and I will make you fishers of people.”<sup>20</sup> Immediately they left their nets and followed him.

**16:16** Simon Peter answered, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.”<sup>17</sup> And Jesus answered him, “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you but my Father in heaven.<sup>18</sup> And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it.

**21:15** When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, “Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?” He said to him, “Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.” Jesus said to him, “Feed my lambs.”<sup>16</sup> A second time he said to him, “Simon son of John, do you love me?” He said to him, “Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.” Jesus said to him, “Tend my sheep.”<sup>17</sup> He said to him the third time, “Simon son of John, do you love me?” Peter felt hurt because he said to him the third time, “Do you love me?” And he said to him, “Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you.” Jesus said to him, “Feed my sheep.”<sup>18</sup> Very truly, I tell you, when you were younger, you used to fasten your own belt and to go wherever you wished. But when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will fasten a belt around you and take you where you do not wish to go.”

*Note:* Find Scripture Notes for this reading on the final page of the lesson.

**3:14** Therefore, beloved, while you are waiting for these things, strive to be found by him at peace, without spot or blemish,<sup>15</sup> and regard the patience of our Lord as salvation. So also our beloved brother Paul wrote to you according to the wisdom given him . . .

<sup>18</sup>But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To him be the glory both now and to the day of eternity. Amen.

### LIVING OUT LOVE

Peter's growth in faith bookends much of John's gospel. From his first appearance in chapter 1, to his renewed call to shepherd others in chapter 21, Peter gives us an example of a flawed yet forgiven disciple. In both chapters, Jesus looks at Peter, calls him by name, and gives him a reimagined future.

Before meeting Jesus, Peter went by Simon, son of John. Then Jesus says in 1:42: "You are to be called Cephus" and John tells us the name is translated as Peter. The word for "rock" is *kephus* in Aramaic and *petra* in Greek. By the end of the gospel, we learn that Simon Peter will be the rock on which Jesus will build the church, but Peter only knows there is something compelling about the man whom John the Baptist called "the Lamb of God." His brother Andrew tells him "We have found the Messiah," and the earliest disciples share Jesus' invitation with others to "come and see" for themselves.

Most of John's gospel has Peter mixed in with other disciples as a group. They are with Jesus together as he teaches and heals. Peter speaks up a few times, notably during the Passover meal, wondering who the disciple is that will betray Jesus, and assuring Jesus of his fidelity. That promise evaporates by the charcoal fire in the courtyard of the high priest in 18:15–27, when Peter denies knowing Jesus three times, just as predicted (13:38).

By the last chapter of the gospel, which some scholars believe was added later, Peter is back fishing, like before Jesus appeared. After all the teaching, healing, and following; after the arrest, trial, and death of the one they called Messiah; even after the first resurrection appearances, Peter is back where he started. Has anything changed? As if to make the point, when Jesus appears he looks at Peter like the first time they met, and calls him by his old name: "Simon, son of John." Then Jesus asks: "Do you love me more than these?" Surely Peter remembered when he

boasted that he would lay down his life for Jesus (13:37), then went out and did the opposite. Here, by another charcoal fire, his old fearful self has another chance. Three times, he professes his love for Jesus. Three times Jesus tells him to tend the sheep. This is what love for Jesus looks like, lived out. The good shepherd, who knows the names of his sheep, whose sheep listen to the sound of his voice, entrusts to flawed, forgiven Peter the task of shepherding the flock.

**When have you experienced the forgiveness of Jesus, or been entrusted with a call from him to love others?**

## LEARNING TO LOVE

The gospels make a clear connection between loving Jesus and loving others. Those who follow Jesus as disciples are to love God and their neighbor. Love isn't stingy and parsed out to a small demographic who deserve it. Love is poured out for all; loaves are passed around; the hungry are fed; those imprisoned are visited; and the lost are sought after and brought to safety. Growing as a disciple of Jesus means growing in our capacity to actively love and care for others.

It's tempting to make Christian growth and discipleship about believing the right things about Jesus. Learn this creed. Recite this prayer. Have you joined the church by answering the right questions? Do you know the Ten Commandments? Jesus tells his followers: "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." (13:34-35) Almost a fifth of John's gospel (chapters 13-17) is about what is ahead for those who will follow Jesus after his death. When Jesus commissions Peter to lead, he clearly defines the task as active love and care for others.

We don't love others because we want God to love us. Like Peter, we undertake the task of loving others because we know we are first loved and forgiven by God. "We love because he first loved us." (1 John 4:19) Our ministry of discipleship—our active love for God and neighbors—is a sign that we are forgiven.

To live out love as Jesus commissioned Peter to do, tending the sheep, we first have to know what the sheep need—not what we assume they need. The word "disciple" comes from the Latin *discipulus*, which means "learner."<sup>1</sup> The first disciples learned from

Jesus, their teacher, from the Holy Spirit, and from each other. They learned from those to whom they went to serve and share. Peter himself is the one who learned what the Gentiles needed in order to hear the good news about Jesus (Acts 10). We continue to learn what it means to be a disciple of Jesus today. We pay faithful attention to the stories of Jesus handed down to us. We listen to the wisdom of our faith tradition, of the Holy Spirit, and of the sheep outside our particular sheepfold. We seek to actively love all those whom Jesus loves and tend to their needs as an expression of our love for Jesus.

 **How can you seek to keep learning as you grow in faith?**

## STEPPING INTO THE WORLD

Growing in our faith is about more than growing in our knowledge of what followers of Jesus believe. It is also about growing in our experience of living and loving as followers of Jesus. What does growing in our faith really look like? How do we live out love as disciples of Jesus today? Look around at those with whom you are growing in faith and seeking to follow Jesus. Some may look like Peter—they are leaders, chair people of ministry teams, teachers, preachers. Others may be more like the “beloved disciple” in John’s Gospel who live out their love for Jesus in a quieter way, sharing the story of Jesus using their particular gifts and talents (21:20–25). There are as many ways to be a disciple of Jesus as there are disciples. Each of us must learn to turn our forgiveness and faith into a life of love. Maybe we stock crayons in classrooms, or give money away, or write newsletter articles about ways to love the community. Maybe we sing in the choir, or teach school, or raise children to know and love Jesus. Maybe we protest and vote and run for public office so love gets turned into policies of care and community. Maybe we serve at the soup kitchen or build homes for unhoused neighbors. Likely, we do many things in our lives that grow out of our love for Jesus. Sometimes we need to reframe what we already do as expressions of our love for Jesus. And sometimes we need to reorient our lives according to what love requires of us.

What is love asking of you in these days? How do the sheep around you need feeding and tending? Who are your neighbors in need? How are you listening to and learning from them, as well as the Holy Spirit and the Scripture and tradition of the faith community?

1. Donald K. McKim, *Westminster Dictionary of Theological Terms* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 78.

Together as forgiven disciples, we keep seeking to mature in faith, to press on toward the goal, to bear fruit, and to grow in grace and love and in the knowledge of God. Like Peter will go on to do, disciples of Jesus keep seeking to learn and grow. We stay open to new revelations from the Spirit of God and keep listening for what love is asking of us today, in our congregations and communities. Then, we get brave and go and do it. When we fail, as we inevitably will, we give thanks for grace and try again.

“Do you love me?” Jesus says. “Feed my sheep.” May it be so.

**② As a disciple of Jesus today, what is love asking of you?**

### SCRIPTURE NOTES

*The following notes from the Uniform Series provide additional information about today's Scripture.*

1. Jesus' question, “But who do you say that I am?” (Matt. 16:15), was addressed to all of the disciples (the “you” is plural). Verse 16 suggests that “the Messiah” is Simon Peter’s own answer (e.g., the “you” is singular).
  2. Simon, son of Jonah, is renamed “Peter” (Matt 16:18); then called “Satan” (v. 23). He is “blessed” (v. 17); then told to “get behind me” (v. 23). Simon is the “rock” on which the church will be built (v. 18); then a “hindrance” in verse 23. Simon Peter embodies very human contrasts.
  3. Jesus asks Peter three times if he loves Jesus, using two words for “love” (*agape* and *phileo*) interchangeably. Gail O’Day demonstrates how these words are used as synonyms throughout the Gospel with no difference in meaning.<sup>2</sup> The thrice-repeated question and answer is commonly interpreted as symbolically rehabilitating Peter following his thrice-repeated denial of Jesus.
  4. Second Peter 3:17 warns against being led astray by false teachings. “But” in verse 18 signals the antidote to being led astray: growing in the grace and knowledge of Jesus Christ. Grace in this verse connotes the divine influence upon the heart, and its reflection in one’s life.
2. Gail O’Day, “John,” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible: A Commentary in Twelve Volumes*, vol. IX, ed. Leander E. Keck (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995), 860.