

# Jesus Reinstates Peter

Devotional Reading: [2 Corinthians 7:1–11](#)

Background Scripture: [John 21:15–25](#)

## John 21:15–19

**15** When they had finished eating, Jesus said to Simon Peter, “Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?”

“Yes, Lord,” he said, “you know that I love you.”

Jesus said, “Feed my lambs.”

**16** Again Jesus said, “Simon son of John, do you love me?”

He answered, “Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.”

Jesus said, “Take care of my sheep.”

**17** The third time he said to him, “Simon son of John, do you love me?”

Peter was hurt because Jesus asked him the third time, “Do you love me?” He said, “Lord, you know all things; you know that I love you.”

Jesus said, “Feed my sheep. **18** Very 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.” **19** Jesus said this to indicate the kind of death by which Peter would glorify God. Then he said to him, “Follow me!”

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## Key Text

*When they had finished eating, Jesus said to Simon Peter, “Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?” “Yes, Lord,” he said, “you know that I love you.” Jesus said, “Feed my lambs.”*

—**John 21:15**

## Jesus Calls Us

### Unit 2: Experiencing the Resurrection

#### Lessons 5–8

## Lesson Aims

After participating in this lesson, each learner will be able to:

1. Summarize the conversation between the risen Jesus and Peter and the reason(s) for it.
2. Explain the relationship between loving Jesus and caring for his sheep.
3. Describe one way he or she will act on that relationship in the coming week.

## Lesson Outline

### Introduction

- A. Redemption
- B. Lesson Context

### I. Jesus Questions Peter (John 21:15–17)

- A. Round One (v. 15)
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- C. Round Three (v. 17)

*The Hikers Ahead*

### II. Jesus Speaks Truth to Peter (John 21:18–19)

- A. Young Life (v. 18a)
- B. Old Age (vv. 18b–19)

*Playful or Painful?*

### Conclusion

- A. Model Disciple
- B. Prayer
- C. Thought to Remember

# How to Say It

Cephas *See-fus*.

Clement *Cleh-muhnt*.

martyr *mahr-ter*.

Nero *Nee-row*.

## Introduction

### A. Redemption

A hockey team may struggle mightily for two periods but turn the game around at the end to earn a comeback win. A runner may experience a painful injury only to finish the race with grim determination and an indomitable spirit. A redemption story depends on early failure but is defined by a finish that makes what came before pale in comparison.

Popular culture loves these stories, especially because of the self-determination that is required for redemption. The redemption story features characters who change their attitudes, make different decisions, and perform more nobly in the end. They redeem themselves.

Our story today is also one of redemption. But it is not the story of a man who failed and then brought himself to a redemptive success. Instead, it is the story of the Lord who called the man to accept redemption.

### B. Lesson Context

This lesson picks up immediately where the previous lesson left off



(see commentary on [John 21:15a](#), below). For this reason, the context from [lesson 7](#) is immediately relevant to the events of [John 21:15–19](#). We note that the focus narrows from the disciples in general to Peter specifically. But keep in mind that as Jesus and Simon Peter speak, they are still in the presence of the others, including John (see commentary on [21:2e](#) in [lesson 7](#)).

The New Testament testifies in various ways to Peter’s unique and ongoing role in Jesus’ ministry and in the earliest life of the church. Along with Paul, Peter stands out among the apostles in terms of his fame and influence. Peter (also known as “Cephas”; [John 1:42](#)) was one of three apostles considered by Paul to be “pillars” of the church ([Galatians 2:9](#)). Peter emerged early on as a leader, bold in word and deed (examples: [Acts 2:14–41](#); [3:1–10](#)). He was among the first to recognize that when Jesus told his followers to “go and make disciples of all nations” ([Matthew 28:19](#)), he really did mean to go to Gentiles without requiring them to take up Jewish practices before accepting him ([Acts 10:9–11:18](#); [15:6–11](#)). Peter’s influence resounded throughout the church. The impact of the events of today’s text are therefore incalculable.

## I. Jesus Questions Peter ([John 21:15–17](#))

### A. Round One (v. 15)

**15a.** When they had finished eating, Jesus said to Simon Peter, “Simon son of John

*When they had finished eating* refers to [John 21:12–13](#) (see [lesson 7](#)). *Simon son of John* is an attention-getting greeting; we might compare it

to a mother calling her son by his first, middle, and last names. Simon's nickname *Peter* was a form of the Greek word that means "rock" ([Matthew 16:18](#); [John 1:42](#)). Son of John suggests a certain formality in the greeting. It might also be a subtle contrast to Jesus' own identity as "the Son of God" ([1:49](#); [5:25](#); [11:27](#); etc.).

### **15b. "do you love me more than these?"**

Peter had overtly denied Jesus while Jesus was on trial ([Matthew 26:69–75](#); [Mark 14:66–72](#); [Luke 22:54–62](#); [John 18:15–18, 25–27](#)). One explanation for Jesus' question (see commentary on [21:16–17](#), below) is simple redemption. This understanding was widespread in ancient Christian interpretation. Jesus was giving Peter the opportunity to repent of his betrayal and reaffirm his love for and devotion to Jesus.

Jesus' question as a call to repentance and redemption also largely refutes the idea that Jesus required affirmation from Peter, as though Jesus did not *know* if Peter loved him, or that Jesus was feeling insecure regarding Peter's lasting loyalty. However, God's testing of Abraham regarding the sacrifice of Isaac seems like an ancient parallel ([Genesis 22:2–18](#)). In that case, we might think that God was eliciting information from Abraham. But, as with Peter, perhaps we do better to consider the test as beneficial to Abraham's own faith. Knowing the lengths Abraham was willing to go to for the Lord, and why ([22:8](#); [Hebrews 11:19](#)), was surely beneficial to the man in the years to come. The same would clearly be true for Peter, given the hardships ahead of him (see commentary on [John 21:18–19](#), below).

Visual for [Lesson 8](#). *Display this visual while the class discusses the questions associated with verse [15d](#).*

Dovetailing with the above two explanations is one more concerned with Peter's prominent role in the first-century church. Even though all of Jesus' disciples abandoned him (with the notable exception of the beloved disciple; [John 18:15; 19:26–27](#)), Peter's denial stands out as particularly grievous. Peter had boldly proclaimed that he would not betray Jesus even if others did ([Mark 14:29–31](#)), making his denials stand out in greater relief. How, then, could Peter become arguably the most influential of the Twelve? How could he, who did not just run but verbally and emphatically denied Jesus, become a faithful leader? John's inclusion of

the series of questions and answers between Jesus and Peter more than justifies the position that Peter would hold ([Matthew 16:17–19](#); see commentary on [John 21:18](#), below).

Though it is possible Jesus was asking whether Peter loved him *more than* Peter loved the other disciples or even his fishing profession, these meanings are unlikely in context. The best explanation is that Jesus was asking whether Peter loved him more than the other disciples did. More than a comparison between the states of their hearts—clearly a task Peter was not qualified to take on—the question was about the depth of Peter’s own love. Did Peter’s experience deepen his love for Christ, or shatter it? And if Peter loved Christ more than the others did, would Peter be prepared to do as Jesus would command? (See commentary on [John 21:15d](#), below.) We might ask ourselves the same questions following sinful failures.

**15c.** “Yes, Lord,” he said, “you know that I love you.”

Peter’s address of Jesus as *Lord* (see commentary on [John 21:7](#) in [lesson 7](#)) communicates Peter’s awareness of Jesus’ power, insight, and authority. One might expect someone called Lord to demand fealty or groveling. Instead, Peter answers Jesus’ question affirmatively, not in terms of mere loyalty but in terms of *love*.

Preachers and scholars have made much of the fact that Jesus and Peter use different words for love. Jesus asks using one Greek verb, while Peter responds with another. Attempts to characterize *agape*—the form Jesus used—as a more godly, divine love doesn’t account for the evidence of actual usage. For example, Jesus used the same word in [Luke 11:43](#) when he rebuked the Pharisees for loving the seats of honor in the synagogues; in Matthew’s record of that same incident, Jesus used the same form that Peter responded with here ([Matthew 23:6](#)). Demas’s love of the

world uses the verb again (2 Timothy 4:10). This illustrates the interchangeability of these two Greek verbs that are translated “love.”

When one surveys the use of these words, both in the Bible and outside of it, the evidence suggests that they were considered near synonyms. This should caution us about attempts to overemphasize their usage in this chapter. It is noteworthy that ancient Christian commentators who spoke Greek fluently make no note of the alternating words in this passage. We do well to think of it as a literary feature, of John choosing not to use the same verb over and over again in order to vary the dialogue and have a more dynamic story.

Though the word *repentance* is not used here, Peter’s response clearly illustrates it. His response was an important step in repairing his relationship with Jesus. Note that Jesus approached Peter; similarly, Jesus approached us before we even knew him (Romans 5:8). Peter may have felt himself on unsteady footing with Jesus—a feeling Jesus did not immediately take steps to alleviate (see commentary on John 21:17, below). But Jesus’ question allowed Peter to affirm for himself and his companions the depth of his love and loyalty, despite his prior stumble. And Jesus’ question to us—whether he will be Lord of our lives, whether *we* love him—is also an opportunity to repent of whatever sins have prevented us from having the relationship we need with him.

### **What Do You Think?**

How do you reaffirm your love for Jesus in your personal devotional time?

### **Digging Deeper**

What difference do those private affirmations make when you have opportunity to confess publicly?

### 15d. Jesus said, “Feed my lambs.”

Jesus had identified himself as “the good shepherd” (John 10:1–16). In that discourse Jesus contrasted himself with Israel’s current spiritual shepherds, who acted more like thieves than caregivers. Jesus’ self-disclosure as Israel’s shepherd was a claim of rightful leadership in ancient terms and even a fulfillment of God’s promises.

For example, in Ezekiel 34 God rebuked Israel’s “shepherds”: the nation’s political-religious leadership. As with corrupt leadership the world over, past and present, these authorities were more concerned with their own welfare and even luxury than with the lives of the people they were tasked with serving (Ezekiel 34:1–6). God promised to remove those shepherds and take up the job himself. He would seek and find the lost sheep; he would feed them and heal them (34:7–16).

In Jesus, God has fulfilled his promise. Jesus is the loving shepherd who feeds and protects his flock. He demonstrated this by healing the sick and feeding the multitudes (examples: John 5:1–9; 6:1–15). Jesus taught God’s love for the lost sheep (Luke 15:1–7) and indicated his own role in seeking the lost (19:10). With Jesus’ time on earth rapidly coming to a close, the task of shepherding his flock was still primarily his own. But Jesus would ensure that his disciples were empowered to care for the fledgling church (24:49; John 14–17)—and this work continues today.

While questioning Peter, Jesus implied that he accepted Peter’s answer. This is understood when we consider that Jesus would not leave Peter such an important task if Jesus did not trust Peter’s renewed dedication. Furthermore, the command to *feed my lambs* would be an ongoing opportunity for Peter to demonstrate his love (see commentary on John 21:19b, below).

### **What Do You Think?**

Who are Jesus' lambs?

### **Digging Deeper**

What role do you play in caring for those lambs?

## **B. Round Two (v. 16)**

**16.** Again Jesus said, “Simon son of John, do you love me?” He answered, “Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.” Jesus said, “Take care of my sheep.”

In a somewhat surprising move, Jesus asked Peter the question *again*. Peter himself may have wondered why Jesus asked again. Nevertheless, he dutifully gave the exact same response, to which Jesus gave the same commission, worded slightly differently.

## **C. Round Three (v. 17)**

**17.** The third time he said to him, “Simon son of John, do you love me?” Peter was hurt because Jesus asked him the third time, “Do you love me?” He said, “Lord, you know all things; you know that I love you.” Jesus said, “Feed my sheep.

Some see in Jesus' three questions a parallel to Peter's three denials (see commentary on [John 21:15b](#), above). Symbolically, Jesus provided Peter with an opportunity to commit to him as many times as Peter had previously denied him. But *Peter* himself did not seem to understand it this way, as shown by the fact he *was hurt* to continue answering the same question. Perhaps Peter felt he was being tested and found want-



ing, since surely Christ knew *all things*. If Jesus knew the answer and continued asking, could it be that Peter harbored some impurity that Jesus was encouraging Peter to recognize?

But still, Peter answered the same way, though more emphatically. Seeing that Jesus ended his questioning here could suggest that Peter passed the test—that no falsehood was found within him as he asserted his love for the *Lord*. Whatever the case, Jesus’ response of *feed my sheep* once again echoes his previous responses to Peter.

Jesus has promised he will appear again, but we don’t know when this will happen ([Mark 13:32–37](#)). In the meantime, do we wall ourselves off from society and proverbially sit at the window, waiting? No! We too have tasks to fulfill. We are not all called to be apostles or preachers or teachers ([1 Corinthians 12:27–31](#)). But we are all called to good works in Christ ([Ephesians 2:10](#)), and whatever other work we do—as parents and grandparents, as employees or bosses, as citizens in our communities—we do “as working for the Lord” ([Colossians 3:23–25](#)). Until Jesus returns, we too can make the most of our time and feed Jesus’ sheep ([Matthew 25:31–46](#)).

### **What Do You Think?**

What evidence is there in your life that you truly love Jesus?

### **Digging Deeper**

What Scriptures shape your thinking about what it means to love Jesus?

## **The Hikers Ahead**

When my wife and I visited Glacier National Park, a friend suggested



that we hike to Avalanche Lake. It was three miles up, the same three back out and down. We both were physically fit enough to walk six miles on a flat trail, but three miles *up*? The problem wasn't distance; it was elevation.

The trail turned out to be even steeper than we anticipated. Several times we thought about turning back. But then other hikers coming down the trail would urge us to keep going: "You can do it!" "It's worth it." And so it was. As we hiked back down, it was our turn to encourage other tired hikers. "Don't give up!" "It's worth it."

Jesus first calls us and then commissions us. He encourages us, telling us our reward is great when we follow him, though the way is even more difficult than we thought. Do you in turn encourage other weary souls to keep climbing?

—D. F.

## II. Jesus Speaks Truth to Peter (John 21:18–19)

### A. Young Life (v. 18a)

**18a.** "Very truly I tell you, when you were younger you dressed yourself and went where you wanted;

*Very truly* translates the Greek word that we have adopted into English as *amen*. Although Jesus always spoke the truth, statements he began in this way often revealed spiritual truth (examples: [John 3:3–5](#); [8:58](#)) or future events (examples: [13:21](#), [38](#)). *When you were younger* sets up a contrast (see commentary on [21:18b](#), below). In the past Peter took care of himself and lived as he saw fit.

## B. Old Age (vv. 18b–19)

**18b.** “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.”

In light of what lay ahead for Peter, faithfulness to Jesus required a love so great that it could overcome the instinct for self-preservation. In Jesus’ words, Peter’s redemption is laid bare. The man loved Jesus, and he would show this through his own ministry and death. *Stretch out your hands* is an allusion to carrying one’s cross to one’s execution. *Someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go* finishes the contrast begun in [John 21:18a](#). Peter’s life would not be his own. In this way, his life would parallel that of Jesus.

The earliest reference to Peter’s death is found in a letter called 1 Clement, attributed to the writer known as Clement of Rome, at the end of the AD 90s. This letter is the oldest Christian writing in our possession outside of the New Testament. It states that Peter was martyred ([1 Clement 5:4](#)). Other early church traditions further date his death in the context of Emperor Nero’s persecution of Christians in AD 64. These traditions state that Peter was crucified, perhaps even upside down, due to Peter’s conviction that he was unworthy to die in the same manner as his Lord. There is no reason to disbelieve these early Christian leaders, especially since their testimony affirms what Jesus himself said would happen.

### What Do You Think?

What can be gained spiritually by having experiences you would not choose?

### Digging Deeper

How can you prepare for undesired experiences so that they can bring spiritual growth?

**19a. Jesus said this to indicate the kind of death by which Peter would glorify God.**

Lest there be any ambiguity about what Jesus meant, John clarified that *Jesus said* these things to signify *the kind of death by which Peter would glorify God* (compare [John 11:4](#); [12:23, 27–28](#); [13:31–32](#); [17:1–15](#)). The idea that being crucified could be a glorious death is a Christian innovation. Crucifixion was intended as a public shaming, an ignoble end to a vile criminal. Following Jesus’ death, the purely negative connotation was turned on its head for Jesus’ followers, because Jesus flipped the script ([Philippians 2:8–11](#)). This radical reinterpretation of crucifixion led Jesus’ followers to reinterpret what the world called shame as glory ([1 Corinthians 1:18–31](#)). What had always in the past been a final humiliation became for Christians an unexpected way in which God glorified himself.

### **What Do You Think?**

What are you doing now to ensure that your eventual death will glorify God?

### **Digging Deeper**

What would you like to change in order to leave behind a legacy that draws others to the Lord?

**19b. Then he said to him, “Follow me!”**

Having warned Peter, Jesus called him again to *follow* ([Matthew 4:18–20](#); [John 1:40–42](#)). This is not the same command as caring for Jesus’ flock. But for Peter, following Jesus would certainly entail care for

the flock (example: [Acts 9:36–41](#)). Indeed, the writings of 1 and 2 Peter continue to edify Jesus’ followers to this day! The image of caring for Jesus’ flock remained with Peter, as his admonitions to Christian leaders attest (example: [1 Peter 5:1–4](#)).

## Playful or Painful?

When my son was a teenager, he asked me to spend a day with him and his friends playing paintball. That sounded great to me, but I quickly learned that some weekend warriors take the game very seriously. And paintballs hurt—especially when you get shot at close range. I came home covered with bruises, thinking, “I will never do that again.” From across the room, though, I heard my son telling his sisters, “Dad and I had a great time today. I’m glad we did it together!”

When you accepted Christ, maybe you thought, *This is going to be great! God will take care of all my problems.* Then after a while you wondered, *This hurts! What’s going on?*

If you make it your goal to glorify God, your journey of faith may take you where you would rather not go. When you fight the good fight, don’t be surprised when you get hurt. But when it is finally over, you may hear yourself saying, “I’m glad the Lord and I did this together.”

—D. F.

## Conclusion

### A. Model Disciple

Peter stands out as a model disciple for a number of reasons. First, Peter was not unique in his need for redemption. All of us stand before

Jesus needing redemption, being incapable of accomplishing it for ourselves. Just as Jesus did for Peter, so also Jesus does for us. He made the first move toward our redemption long ago on the cross and continues to invite us to accept his sacrifice as the atonement for our own sins ([Romans 3:25](#)). God's grace is magnified by the fact that Jesus himself, the offended party, initiated the process. This is consistent with the biblical story in which God, who is always the offended party, initiates reconciliation with sinful humanity.

Second, Peter's redemption resulted in commission. Like Peter, we confess our love for our Lord and Savior. Doing so must result in our commitment to living lives that parallel Jesus' own: being more concerned about the will of the Father than with our own agendas ([Matthew 16:24–27](#); [John 14:23–24](#)). Though how we each live out Jesus' commission varies based on our circumstances, each of us is called to the life of faith.

Third, our commission comes with knowledge of what our faithfulness can cost us. Like Peter, we accept the call with the clear understanding that because Christ suffered and we are his, we too expect the life of faith to entail suffering ([John 15:18–16:4](#)), just as Peter's did. Sometimes this means physical suffering or even death at the hands of the world (example: [Acts 7:54–60](#)). Sometimes it means enduring shame and torment for righteousness' sake.

Fourth, like Peter's pain, our own suffering comes with a promise. When we suffer like Christ and for godly purposes, we bring glory to the Lord—no matter how humiliating the world might believe our plight to be ([Matthew 5:10–12](#)).

None of us today have had an encounter with Christ like Peter did. But when you tell the story of how God has redeemed you, what role do

believers like Peter play? In whose redemption story do you (or *should* you) play a role?

## B. Prayer

Heavenly Father, thank you for making our redemption story possible. Help us to embrace living lives that parallel Jesus' life and bring glory to you, even in suffering. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

## C. Thought to Remember

Do you love Jesus?  
Follow him.

# Involvement Learning

*Enhance your lesson with NIV Bible Student (from your curriculum supplier) and the reproducible activity page (at [www.standardlesson.com](http://www.standardlesson.com) or in the back of the NIV Standard Lesson Commentary Deluxe Edition).*

## Into the Lesson

Divide the class into two teams. Distribute a large sheet of paper and a marker to each team. Ask one team to brainstorm a list of advantages of winning a game or coming in first. Ask the other team to list advantages of losing. After a couple of minutes, call time. Bring the class back together and post the two lists. Talk together about the lists and why people usually value winning more than they value losing.

Move to the next part of the lesson by saying, “We all know how bad it feels when we are considered a loser. In this lesson we’ll see how Peter went from being the loser who denied Jesus to one who would serve him faithfully to the end.”

*Alternative.* Divide the class into small groups. Distribute copies of the “Sheep, Sheep, Shepherd” exercise from the activity page, which you can download. Have learners complete it individually in one minute or less before discussing questions with small groups. Bring the groups back together before transitioning to the Bible study by saying, “In today’s lesson we’ll discover what Peter learned about being a shepherd.”

## Into the Word

Using a concordance, find references to “shepherd(s).” Write discovered characteristics on the board. (Some passages to use are [Matthew 9:36](#); [Luke 15:1–7](#); and [John 10:11–15](#).) Discuss what makes a compelling shepherd/leader, someone others want to follow.

Have students break into small groups of four or five people. Distribute handouts (you prepare) to each group with the following questions: 1—Read [Matthew 26:69–75](#) and [Luke 22:55–62](#). In what ways and how many times did Peter deny Jesus? How do we know he deeply regretted his denial? What is it about Luke’s account that makes this especially poignant? 2—Read [John 21:15–17](#). What’s the significance of Jesus asking Peter three times if Peter loved him? How would this be a way to heal Peter’s relationship with Jesus? What is the significance of Jesus telling Peter to feed his lambs/sheep? 3—Read [John 21:18–19](#). What did Jesus reveal to Peter about Peter’s death? How would this help prepare Peter? Why did Jesus say to him, “Follow me”?

Allow time for groups to work through the handout. Using what they



discovered in their groups, along with the list on the board, lead a whole-class discussion on Jesus' forgiveness of Peter and on Peter's role changing from a sheep to a shepherd.

## Into Life

Ask participants to consider what they might require of someone who wished to restore a relationship with them after a relational breach. How does this compare and contrast with what Jesus asked of Peter? Invite participants to tell ways they have experienced restored relationships. Contrast with [Luke 14:26](#), in which God expects us to “hate” our own families and our own lives. Then ask: “How does the story of Peter (who denied Jesus at the very point of Jesus' death) and Peter's redemption provide us with another way of approaching those who have broken relationships—especially within the church?”

Distribute index cards and pencils. Encourage learners to use these for notes as you work through the following thinking and prayer time:

- 1—What does following Jesus because you love him look like in your life?
- 2—Jesus welcomed Peter with open arms. For whom can you “stand on the shore” with open arms? What broken relationship can you restore in this way?
- 3—How does your relationship with Jesus serve as an invitation for others?
- 4—What is one way you can share that relationship with others this week?

*Alternative.* Distribute copies of the “Revised Hollywood Ending” activity from the activity page. Have learners complete as indicated.