

MY PRESENCE, YOUR REWARD

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Your life and mine do not follow the same road map. Some of the turns and grades I've traveled have led me to wonder if I got the wrong map, or if my map was obsolete. But I have learned some important lessons along the way, from the Scriptures.

I hope to encourage you today (through the life of Peter) to listen more attentively to Jesus and risk difficulty or disappointment for the reward of His presence.

We'll review the highlights of Peter's life in terms of eight invitations he received from Jesus, and see how the Master groomed Peter's faith, and how He may be grooming yours. As we move along, try to keep in mind that God knows the end from the beginning and He knows your thoughts from afar. Indeed, He is the Master of this process.

First invitation: Follow Me.

Matthew 4:18 One day as Jesus was walking along the shore of the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers—Simon, also called Peter, and Andrew—throwing a net into the water, for they fished for a living. ¹⁹ Jesus called out to them, "Come, follow me, and **I will show you how to fish for people!**" ²⁰ And they left their nets at once and followed him.

Jesus' invitation to follow, included a promise to convert their knowledge and skills to a new purpose. He takes you as you are and repurposes your abilities. How cool is that?!

Purpose: Be with Him.

Mark 3:14 He appointed twelve (whom he named apostles), so that they would **be with him** and he could send them to preach ^{3:15} and to have authority to cast out demons. (Amplified Bible: be **continually** with Him)

It was this closeness that prepared Peter for the next challenge. The time he spent with Jesus taught him that Jesus could do anything, and encouraged him to believe that Jesus could help *him* do anything.

Second invitation: Come to Me.

Matthew 14:22 Immediately after this, Jesus insisted that his disciples get back into the boat and cross to the other side of the lake, while he sent the people home. ²³ After sending them home, he went up into the hills by himself to pray. Night fell while he was there alone.

²⁴ Meanwhile, the disciples were in trouble far away from land, for a strong wind had risen, and they were fighting heavy waves. ²⁵ About three o'clock in the morning Jesus came toward them, walking on the water. ²⁶ When the disciples saw him walking on the water, they were terrified. In their fear, they cried out, "It's a ghost!"

²⁷ But Jesus spoke to them at once. "Don't be afraid," he said. **"Take courage. I am here!"**

²⁸ Then Peter called to him, "Lord, if it's really you, tell me to come to you, walking on the water."

²⁹ **"Yes, come,"** Jesus said.

So Peter went over the side of the boat and walked on the water toward Jesus. ³⁰ But when he saw the strong wind and the waves, he was terrified and began to sink. "Save me, Lord!" he shouted.

³¹ Jesus immediately reached out and grabbed him. "You have so little faith," Jesus said. "Why did you doubt me?"

Did you notice Jesus' question? "Why did you doubt ME?" Why did you doubt that I could help you? Why did you doubt that I could help you do *even the impossible*?

After this, Peter became attached to Jesus. His life revolved around Jesus and what Jesus was doing. So much so, that he could no longer imagine life without Jesus. He could no longer see himself apart from Jesus. Staying close to Jesus was all that mattered.

A rebuke/Third invitation: Get away from Me. Then, follow Me.

Jesus reiterated His first invitation, adding qualifiers for the second phase of following.

Matthew 16:21 From then on Jesus began to tell his disciples plainly that it was necessary for him to go to Jerusalem, and that he would suffer many terrible things at the hands of the elders, the leading priests, and the teachers of religious law. He would be killed, but on the third day he would be raised from the dead.

Peter was unable to hear these words from Jesus. They did not make sense because Peter could not turn the first corner. He could not appreciate the resurrection of Jesus, because he was unwilling to imagine the *death* of Jesus. He froze inside at the word "killed." It was more than brutal; it was final. To Peter, it meant separation, aloneness again. No way!

Matthew 16:22 Peter took him aside and began to reprimand him for saying such things. "Heaven forbid, Lord," he said. "This will never happen to you!"

²³ Jesus turned to Peter and said, "Get away from me, Satan! You are a dangerous trap to me. You are seeing things merely from a human point of view, not from God's."

²⁴ Then Jesus said to his disciples, “If any of you wants to be my follower, you must turn from your selfish ways, take up your cross, and follow me. ²⁵ If you try to hang on to your life, you will lose it. But if you give up your life for my sake, you will save it.

To find the life you were made for, first, you must be willing to let go of the life you have. If you insist on hanging onto the life you like, the life that is pleasant, the life that is comfortable, or perhaps just the life that is familiar, you will not discover the life you could have with Jesus. Until you die to a self-directed life, you cannot know a God-directed life.

Many people choose a religious life over a God-directed life. From a distance, they look very similar, but, to tell the truth, you don’t *actually need God* to live a religious life—you only need to talk about God.

To live a God-directed life, you must learn to listen to God, even above your own voice and your own thoughts.

Fourth invitation: Listen to Him.

Matthew 17:1 Jesus took Peter and the two brothers, James and John, and led them up a high mountain to be alone. ² As the men watched, Jesus’ appearance was transformed so that his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became as white as light.

³ Suddenly, Moses and Elijah appeared and began talking with Jesus.

⁴ Peter exclaimed, “Lord, it’s wonderful for us to be here! If you want, I’ll make three shelters as memorials—one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.”

⁵ But even as he spoke, a bright cloud overshadowed them, and a voice from the cloud said, “This is my dearly loved Son, who brings me great joy. **Listen to him.**”

Listen to Him. Be willing. Be attentive. Be submissive. Be obedient. Nothing can make up for a lack of attention.

Fifth invitation: Keep watch for Him.

Mark 13:34 “The coming of the Son of Man can be illustrated by the story of a man going on a long trip. When he left home, he gave each of his slaves instructions about the work they were to do, and he told the gatekeeper to watch for his return. ³⁵ You, too, must keep watch! For you don’t know when the master of the household will return—in the evening, at midnight, before dawn, or at daybreak. ³⁶ Don’t let him find you sleeping when he arrives without warning. ³⁷ I say to you what I say to everyone: **Watch for him!**”

The passage of time threatens our strongest intentions. If we do not renew our vows from time to time, our will becomes weakened. We may even give up. That is the wrong kind of surrender. That is surrender to the wrong motivation. If we do that, we

have forgotten who we are and who we are becoming. We have forgotten *whose* we are.

Foot-washing: You belong to Me.

John 13:6 When Jesus came to Simon Peter, Peter said to him, “Lord, are you going to wash my feet?”

⁷ Jesus replied, “You don’t understand now what I am doing, but someday you will.”

⁸ “No,” Peter protested, “you will never ever wash my feet!”

Jesus replied, “**Unless I wash you, you won’t belong to me.**”

⁹ Simon Peter exclaimed, “Then wash my hands and head as well, Lord, not just my feet!”

¹⁰ Jesus replied, “A person who has bathed all over does not need to wash, except for the feet, to be entirely clean.

Simple faith is preferable to religious fanaticism. Fanaticism never makes you better, never makes you closer to God. Only faith can do that. Just trust Him. You don’t need to *prove* it, simply *do it*.

Another rebuke: Put away your sword.

John 18:10 Then Simon Peter drew a sword and slashed off the right ear of Malchus, the high priest’s slave. ¹¹ But Jesus said to Peter, “**Put your sword back into its sheath. Shall I not drink from the cup of suffering the Father has given me?**”

Remember, your ways are not His ways. His ways are higher.

God doesn’t require your protection or your defense. He manages quite well on His own. He wants only your cooperation.

His ways may be difficult to understand, but they are always better, always an improvement.

Peter’s denial: He went away.

Matthew 26:31 On the way, Jesus told them, “Tonight all of you will desert me. For the Scriptures say,

‘God will strike the Shepherd,
and the sheep of the flock will be scattered.’

³² But after I have been raised from the dead, I will go ahead of you to Galilee and meet you there.”

³³ Peter declared, “Even if everyone else deserts you, I will never desert you.”

³⁴ Jesus replied, “**I tell you the truth, Peter**—this very night, before the rooster crows, you will deny three times that you even know me.”

³⁵ “No!” Peter insisted. “Even if I have to die with you, I will never deny you!” And all the other disciples vowed the same.

A short time later, Jesus was arrested and taken to the home of the High Priest.

Matthew 26:69 Meanwhile, Peter was sitting outside in the courtyard. A servant girl came over and said to him, “You were one of those with Jesus the Galilean.”

⁷⁰ But Peter denied it in front of everyone. “I don’t know what you’re talking about,” he said.

⁷¹ Later, out by the gate, another servant girl noticed him and said to those standing around, “This man was with Jesus of Nazareth.”

⁷² Again Peter denied it, this time with an oath. “I don’t even know the man,” he said.

⁷³ A little later some of the other bystanders came over to Peter and said, “You must be one of them; we can tell by your Galilean accent.”

⁷⁴ Peter swore, “A curse on me if I’m lying—I don’t know the man!” And immediately the rooster crowed.

⁷⁵ Suddenly, Jesus’ words flashed through Peter’s mind: “Before the rooster crows, you will deny three times that you even know me.” And **he went away, weeping bitterly.**

Jesus understands. He understands God (and God’s plan) better than we do. He even understands you better than you do. Both in terms of your weaknesses and your strengths. You will let yourself down, but Jesus will still stand with you. Wherever you find yourself, whenever you come to yourself, Jesus will be eagerly waiting.

Sixth invitation: Meet Me in Galilee.

Mark 16:6 The angel said, “Don’t be alarmed. You are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He isn’t here! He is risen from the dead! Look, this is where they laid his body. ⁷ Now go and tell his disciples, including Peter, that Jesus is going ahead of you to Galilee. **You will see him there, just as he told you before he died.**”

The thing that made Galilee special was not its physical location. Instead, it was its *volitional location*. It was the place where Peter first decided to follow Jesus.

You will revisit that first decision many times, but you will never return as you once were, even if you have failed God or run from Him since then.

I remember exactly where I was when I first decided to follow Jesus. I remember exactly where I was when I first realized I loved Martha. I remember exactly where I was when she agreed to marry me. However, the sacredness of those places is *within me*; it is not in the places themselves.

Jesus told the woman at the well, “Believe Me, woman, a time is coming when you will worship the Father **neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem.**” (John 4:21)

Peter needed to revisit the place where he first chose to follow Jesus. But he did not return in the same condition. Everything he had seen, heard, and learned, he brought back with him.

You can never go back to “square one,” because you are no longer the same as you were. Whether triumph or failure has prompted your return, you are better now than you were. When you renew your vow, it will be upon a stronger foundation than it was at first. It always is. That’s the great thing about renewal.

Resurrection: Go, and I will be with you.

Matthew 28:18 Jesus came and told his disciples, “I have been given all authority in heaven and on earth.”¹⁹ Therefore, go and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.²⁰ Teach these new disciples to obey all the commands I have given you. And be sure of this: **I am with you always, even to the end of the age.**”

He did not say, “Until you blow it.” His presence and availability is not dependent on your performance. It is a feature of “the age.” And, until this age ends, He will always be with you.

Seventh invitation: Have breakfast with Me.

John 21:10 “Bring some of the fish you’ve just caught,” Jesus said.¹¹ So Simon Peter went aboard and dragged the net to the shore. There were 153 large fish, and yet the net hadn’t torn.

¹² “**Now come and have some breakfast!**” Jesus said.

This post-resurrection appearance and invitation was crucial. The disciples needed desperately to know that Jesus was alive—more alive than before—and still a Faithful Friend. Hear me now: There are few better ways to renew friendships than to share a meal together.

Eighth invitation: Follow Me.

The eighth, and final, invitation was a repeat of the first.

John 21:18 “I tell you the truth, when you were young, you were able to do as you liked; you dressed yourself and went wherever you wanted to go. But when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and others will dress you and take you where you don’t want to go.”¹⁹ Jesus said this to let [Peter] know by what kind of death he would glorify God. Then Jesus told him, “**Follow me.**”

Now, after so much water (so many experiences) had passed beneath the bridge of Peter's faith, these words fell like good seeds on fertile soil. Peter's self-will and self-reliance had been plowed under repeatedly. The soil of his heart was ready for God's planting, ready to do God's will.

Ascension: Go in My name.

Acts 1:6 So when the apostles were with Jesus, they kept asking him, "Lord, has the time come for you to free Israel and restore our kingdom?"

⁷ He replied, "The Father alone has the authority to set those dates and times, and they are not for you to know. ⁸ But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you. And **you will be my witnesses**, telling people about me everywhere—in Jerusalem, throughout Judea, in Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

⁹ After saying this, he was taken up into a cloud while they were watching, and they could no longer see him.

They could no longer see Him with their physical eyes, but He was nearer than before. The Holy Spirit brought the presence of Jesus into their hearts. And isn't that where life and witness begins?

Perhaps you have been something like Peter—sometimes impetuous, sometimes brick-headed, sometimes bold, sometimes misguided, sometimes heroic, sometimes bitterly defeated. If so, perhaps you could relate to some of the Scriptures I have shared today, and have found encouragement to pursue—maybe renew—your opportunities to be with Jesus.

Think about this: If you could have Heaven—no sickness, no sorrow, no death, all love, all peace, every blessing—but without Jesus, would it be enough?

Think about that.

If you could have Heaven—no sickness, no sorrow, no death, all love, all peace, every blessing—but without Jesus, would it be enough?

If so, then you haven't yet learned to love Jesus Christ for who He is.

If so, then your praises are more about what you have received than about who you know.

If so, then you may need to revisit the roots of your decision to follow Christ.

If not now, when? If not here, where?