

Awesome Obedience and the One Question

John 21:1-19

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By the age of 23 Alexander the Great had conquered most of the known world. In the spring of 331 B.C., seeking to expand his kingdom to the east, he set out with his armies toward India. All went smoothly until he came to the region of Bactria and to a well-fortified city.

When he arrived at the city, Alexander sent two-thirds of his army on toward India. He kept one-third, including his personal bodyguard of 100 choice soldiers. With these he marched to the wall of the city and demanded to see the king. When the king of this city-state appeared, Alexander screamed, "I am Alexander! Surrender immediately!" The king laughed. "Why should I surrender to you? We've heard of you, Alexander, and we're prepared for you. We outnumber you."

At that, Alexander gave a command to his elite guard. These 100 men lined up single file, facing a cliff at the edge of the city. Then Alexander said, "March!" and they did, right to the cliff, and they kept marching. The king watched in amazement as the first man marched right off the cliff, falling hundreds of feet to the rocks below . . . and then the second, and the third . . . one by one without hesitation, until Alexander commanded, "*Stop!*" and the eleventh man stopped on the edge of the cliff.

Alexander looked at the king, and the king surrendered on the spot.
The power of obedience . . . and Alexander conquered the civilized world.

Awesome obedience.

I've read or heard this story in a number of different places. In one book, it was entitled, "Awesome Obedience." All the books ponder the question, What if? What if the followers of Christ were as obedient as the followers of Alexander? Jesus said, "If any would be my disciple, let him take up his cross and come follow me."

Awesome obedience . . . awesome results.

You've heard how at a Bible study once upon a time a man said, "The world has yet to see what God could do through one man fully surrendered to the cause of Christ." And another said, "By God's grace I will be that man." That second man was William Booth, founder of the Salvation Army.

Awesome obedience . . . awesome results.

We pray "Thy kingdom come" almost every Sunday. May the kingdom advance:

in our homes as we lead our children,
in our work as we work to the glory of God,
in our world as we spread His Gospel.

We are “fishers of men.”

John 21:1: *After this Jesus revealed himself again to the disciples by the Sea of Tibe'ri-as; and he revealed himself in this way. Simon Peter, Thomas called the Twin, Nathan'a-el of Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zeb'edee, and two others of his disciples were together. Simon Peter said to them, "I am going fishing." They said to him, "We will go with you."*

They went out and got into the boat; but that night they caught nothing. Just as day was breaking, Jesus stood on the beach; yet the disciples did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to them, "Children, have you any fish?" They answered him, "No." He said to them, "Cast the net on the right side of the boat, and you will find some." So they cast it, and now they were not able to haul it in, for the quantity of fish.

In 1984, driving the Denver Mechanical Supply Truck, I heard a powerful sermon on this passage by a very famous preacher. Ever since then I've taught on it and preached it. What impressed me was the *awesome obedience* of the disciples and the incredible results. Just think! — How tragic if the disciples had not obeyed and had no fish and had no breakfast of joy with Jesus.

Jesus commands obedience, and He knows where the fish are. “Cast it on the right side of the boat, and you will find some.” Now, these fellows had been fishing all night and caught nothing. Peter was even a professional fisherman.

“The other side of the boat” — how *absurd!*
“Wait until you're married to have sex.”
“Don't look on a woman with lust.”
“Sell your possessions and give to the poor.”
“Pick up a cross and come follow me.”
“Cast your net on the other side of the boat.”

That's *absurd!* Next verse:

So they cast it . . .

They didn't argue, they didn't debate, they didn't ask for explanations; they immediately and fully obeyed the resurrected Christ, and look what happened. *Awesome.*

To those disciples, fish was not sport but sustenance . . . livelihood. Fish was life. And Jesus brings life. He knows where the life is. He *knows* how to make life work.

Maybe you feel like you aren't catching any fish. Maybe you feel like life isn't working. Ask yourself: “Where's my net? Am I obedient?”

If you want to catch fish —
Have you thrown your net where Jesus tells you?
If you want a good business —
Are you cheating on your taxes?
If you want a good marriage —
Are you looking at pornography?
If you want your kids to respect you —
Are you telling white lies?
If you want your work to be fulfilling —
Do you “work heartily in everything as serving the Lord”?
If you want fish and life —
Listen to the One who created the fish. Obedience: It’s the story of Israel over and over.
When they’re obedient they have life; when they’re disobedient they have hunger and death.
If you want fish —
Throw your net where Jesus tells you.
If you want life to work —
Are you obedient?
If you’re disobedient —
What right do you have to complain that life is not working, that you have no fish?

Well, the fish here represent more than livelihood; they represent the souls of people. Jesus had told Peter once before, when He first called him on the Sea of Tiberius, that he would be a “fisher of men.” It was then that Jesus had also told him to “let down” his nets, and he had a miraculous catch so large that the nets tore and the boat started to sink. When Peter saw the astounding results, he did a strange thing. He fell on his knees and asked Jesus to leave, saying, “I’m a sinful man.” Well, whatever.

The fish represent people. And how tragic if they’d never thrown the net.

Awesome obedience . . . incredible results.

Several years ago I was in California doing a wedding for two of my old youth group kids, Chris and Kelly. Chris was going to Fuller Seminary.

At the pre-wedding barbeque one of my old small group Bible study guys, Brian, came up and grabbed me. I’d been wondering how he was doing. As a high-schooler he had been through really hard times. One night at Bible study he said, “Do you guys ever think about killing yourself?” I quickly prayed, and we had an incredible discussion that night.

At the barbeque he pulled me aside and said, “I’ve been praying I would have a chance to tell you what an impact God had through you on my life. Your talks hit me . . . God used you.” He had just come back from a mission trip in Bangladesh.

It was pretty thrilling: times when I felt exhausted, washed up and confused, but offered just a little obedience and threw the net, and *fish, fish, fish, fish!*

Another example . . .

On that very same week, a couple days later, I called another of my old youth group kids, Bill Baldrige, from L.A. Bill was the kid in my youth group in L.A. that I was closest to, that I had the most invested in. In my heart he was the poster child for Peter Hiett Ministries.

Bill had confessed Jesus while watching TV and then come to our youth group looking for some answers. His dad was an alcoholic and caused Bill a lot of pain. But Bill found comfort and Jesus in our fellowship.

And Bill changed our fellowship. His hunger for God was contagious. His mind was brilliant; he was the life of our parties. In many ways Bill was my best friend in L.A. He had told me God had used me to change his life. For a while he also planned to go to Fuller Seminary.

But over the years Bill started struggling with his faith. We talked some, but we hadn't talked for a few years. Recently I had talked to Wade his best friend about the Lord, but not Bill.

Well, for eight or nine months previous to this time, I had been thinking, "I really ought to call Bill and Wade and tell them about the great things God has done in my life . . . miraculous things! . . . and encourage them."

Well, finally, that Tuesday (six years ago) I got around to it. No one answered at Bill's place, so I called Wade's house. I talked to his dad a while and then he said, "Well, I guess you heard about Bill."

I said, "No." He said, "Oh gosh. I guess they didn't get a hold of you." I said, "What *about* Bill?" He told me this: "A few weeks ago Bill took a walk in a garden somewhere over near UCLA where he was a student. He took a walk in the garden, sat down in a corner, pulled a gun out of a brown paper bag, and shot himself in the heart . . . and died."

A little voice inside me seemed so say, "Peter, you weren't obedient. Peter, you should have called. You failed. Peter, you didn't throw the net, and now the fish is gone for good." And I felt like I wanted to get drunk . . . because I couldn't handle the weight.

Maybe you're hearing a voice. "You failed. You wrecked your marriage. You ruined your children. You wrecked that friendship." Maybe now they're gone for good . . . suicide or whatever.

I just wanted to get drunk, because I couldn't handle the weight. Fortunately, I called Susan and said, "Honey, please just pray to Jesus for me."

I wish you could have known Bill. Very few men have I loved as much as Bill. For six years now, whenever I hear an old U2 song, for instance, I dream about running into the garden courtyard and stopping Bill, tackling him and saying, "Bill, I love you. Don't do this!" I'm tempted by this thought: What if? What if I had called? What if I had thrown a net?

That all happened the week I was set to preach on John 21. At first it terrorized me. Then I read it *well*, and it set me free.

I began to think about Peter fishing that day on the sea. Three years earlier Jesus had told Peter he would be a fisher of men. It was Peter who first declared Jesus as the Christ, the Son of the Living God. And Jesus said, “On this rock [“petros”] I will build my church.”

It seems Peter was set to be the leader of the church. (He, James, and John were Jesus’ best friends.) Peter boasted just a week or so before that if all the others fell away, he would not. “My obedience will be awesome!”

And then within a few hours Peter denied Jesus three times publicly. He was a traitor, he was disobedient, he was ignorant and weak; his friend Judas had killed himself. Now he had seen Jesus at least twice in His resurrected state with the other disciples, but it appears they hadn’t talked personally.

If I was Peter I’d be desperately wondering what Jesus was thinking. Confused, guilty, and frightened, I’d be wondering:

Am I still to be a fisher of men? If so, how on earth can I carry such a burden? How can I begin to catch the souls of men for Christ?

And in his funk, Peter goes fishing. That’s one thing this fisherman knows how to make work! He knows how to catch fish.

But all night he catches nothing. He catches nothing, and Jesus watches. Think about that. The catching of nothing on one side of the boat is just as much of a miracle as the catching of everything on the other side of the boat!

Isn’t Jesus Lord of your “failures”? Or is He only Lord of your successes? Isn’t Jesus Lord when you think your life isn’t working? Some people give up on God because they say, “He doesn’t work. He doesn’t make my life work!” Yet He “subjected all creation to futility [to not working]” (Romans 8). And God “consigned all men to disobedience” (Romans 11). Maybe nobody’s life works and nobody’s been obedient.

All night they catch nothing, and then some clown yells:

“Hey boys — got any fish?”

“No!”

“Well, throw your nets on the *other* side.”

At this point, they don’t even know it’s Jesus. But what do they have to lose now? You see, it is anything *but* an “awesome obedience.” It’s more like the desperate cast of some humbled and confused fisherman.

In the past Peter would have yelled, “Shut up, pinhead!” But now he has no pride and nothing to lose. So they cast the net . . . and the water teems with fish.

John (Peter's old fishing partner) remembers the incident from three years before and yells, "It's the Lord!" You'll remember that in that previous incident the nets tore and the boat almost sunk. In *this* instance, the nets don't tear. It's like they can *handle* all the fish now—the awesome results now.

People think God can't use them because they've failed. Maybe it's more like the opposite. Maybe God won't really use you until you've realized you're a failure.

Remember that the first time this happened, Peter focused on the incredible fish and himself and his own disobedience, and he said, "Depart from me, for I'm a sinful man." If I think incredible results are dependent on my awesome obedience, I can't handle the weight.

But *now* Peter seems to forget about the fish and his failure. He forgets about the results; he forgets his obedience or lack of obedience; He puts on his clothes and springs into the sea, swimming a 100-yard freestyle right to Jesus.

Brennan Manning wrote:

Suppose for a moment that in a flash of insight you discovered that all your motives for ministry were essentially egocentric, or suppose that last night you got drunk and committed adultery, or suppose that you failed to respond to a cry for help and the person committed suicide. What would you do?

Would guilt, self-condemnation, and self-hatred consume you, or would you jump into the water and swim a hundred yards at breakneck speed toward Jesus?

Verse 7: That disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, "It is the Lord!" When Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he put on his clothes, for he was stripped for work, and sprang into the sea. But the other disciples came in the boat, dragging the net full of fish, for they were not far from the land, but about a hundred yards off. When they got out on land, they saw a charcoal fire there, with fish lying on it, and bread.

Did you see that? — Jesus already *has* fish . . . cooked with a side dish! He doesn't *need* the disciples' fish. In fact, it's like Jesus has fish coming out of His ears in the Gospels! Busloads of fish are just as easy as no fish for Jesus. Fish aren't the issue.

Do you realize you serve a sovereign, all-powerful God who created an entire universe out of nothing and can make rocks and stones sing His praises and donkeys prophesy? For Him, making you a millionaire is just as easy as *not* making you a millionaire. It's not the issue.

He's the One who turns the hearts of men toward Himself.

He's the One who breathes life into people dead in their trespasses and sins.

He's the One who controls the results, the successes, and the failures in your life.

He's the One who produces fruit.

So the results must not be the issue here. The kingdom *will* come regardless of you. If they hadn't cast the net, Jesus still would have had fish already on the barbeque! Then get this . . . verse 10 . . .

Jesus said to them, "Bring some of the fish that you have just caught."

"Guys, bring some of the fish *you* caught!" But they didn't *catch* them! Jesus made those fish swim into their nets. It's obvious. Did you think you could save somebody's soul? As if their eternity depended on your temporality?

When my kids were little and I'd take them fishing . . .

*I'd bring the gear,
I'd pack the lunch,
I'd bait the hook,
I'd spot a trout in a hole,
I'd drop the worm in front of the fish,
I'd set the hook when it bit . . .
. . . then I'd let one of the kids reel it in.*

When we would get back to the car, they would say, "Mommy, look at the fish I caught!" I'd say, "Yep, just look at the fish they caught!"

And Jesus said, "Guys, bring some of the fish *you* caught." And they knew . . . my kids knew . . . they caught them by their father's grace.

And if one of my kids dropped the pole and the fish got away, I didn't make them *pay* . . . I didn't make them pay for the gas or buy me a fish at Safeway on the way home.

Verse 11: *So Simon Peter went aboard and hauled the net ashore, full of large fish, a hundred and fifty-three of them; and although there were so many, the net was not torn. Jesus said to them, "Come and have breakfast." Now none of the disciples dared ask him, "Who are you?" They knew it was the Lord.*

Jesus came and took the bread and gave it to them, and so with the fish. This was now the third time that Jesus was revealed to the disciples after he was raised from the dead. (Can you imagine that breakfast?)

When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter . . .

Can you imagine how Peter's heart jumped when Jesus turned to him? And what does Jesus say?

"Peter, you've proven untrustworthy. John will now lead."

"Peter, you've pierced my soul with your denial."

“Peter, you disobeyed.”

“Peter, let’s review what happened.”

“Peter, can you identify the moment you failed?”

“Peter, have you developed a plan of action so that next time this won’t happen again?”

“Peter, have you determined to call people whenever you get a notion?”

“Peter, do you realize it was Satan haunting you to call, so that now he can trap you in guilt? Don’t be trapped by his notions!”

“Peter have you yet admitted to yourself you kind of didn’t *want* to call, because you didn’t want to get involved. The notion was from *me!*”

Peter . . . so confused and stubborn and arrogant and insecure all at once, and so unable to sort it all out. There is *so much* Jesus could have said and asked at the fire after breakfast. But He turned and asked only one question: “Peter, do you love me more than these?”

“Peter do you love me more than these? More than 153 big, miracle fish? More than the disciples you’ll lead? Peter, do you love me more than the results, more than what I’ll do through you or *not* do through you? More than 3000 converts in one day after the Spirit comes on you, and then 5000 another day? More than your pride?

“You’ll still blow it, Peter. Paul’s going to publicly rebuke you in Antioch, and we’re going to get the whole thing published in the Bible, the world’s #1 all-time best seller . . . Galatians chapter 2.

“Peter, will you swim to me then? For this is always the issue: Do you love me? That’s the one question. I take care of the rest. I take care of the fish; I take care of Bill’s heart and Bill’s story and your forgiveness (if need be).

“But in the mystery of providence, freedom, time, and eternity (what you call success and failure) I have this one question; it’s all that matters, at any moment: Do you love me? Do you love me more than these? — fish, success, fruit, people, your life? If you don’t, you’re spoiled, loving the gift more than the giver.”

If my children came to love fish more than the father who took them fishing, they’d be miserable, and I’d never take them fishing. Or if I did, I’d make sure they didn’t catch any fish.

If you’re not content with weakness, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities—your life not working—for the sake of Christ, I bet you’re spoiled (like me).

“Do you love me more than these?”

- He asked him three times for three denials.
- Three times, “Do you love me?” and three times, “Yes, Lord, you know I love you.”
- Three times Jesus says, “Feed my lambs, tend my sheep, feed my sheep.”
- Three times: “If you love me then obey, feed, tend, and fish.”

I think it means this:

“Peter, *fish!* not because you’ll catch fish . . . I control the fish. Fish because you love me and I ask you to.”

“Peter, *preach!* not because your church will be big, but because you love me and I ask you to.”

“Andrew, *evangelize!* not because *you’ll* save them, but because you love me and I ask you to.”

“Christian, *obey!* not because you want a good marriage or because you want your kids to grow up well or because you want a good business or because you want to grow a church or convert your neighbors or catch fish or want good results and good things to happen. Obey me because you love me and I ask you to.”

Don’t you know that every good and perfect gift comes down from above, from the Father of lights? He controls the fish. It’s grace.

You are the new Israel. You live in the new eternal covenant of grace, where good things are not earned by your awesome obedience. Good things—good results—are already earned by the awesome obedience of one man fully surrendered to God: Jesus, the soldier who laid down His life and won the kingdom.

The world is now seeing what God has already done through that one man, Jesus Christ. He’s done everything through Him. And it’s true that in space and time, according to His plan, Christ works through people. But it’s a rather strange statement — “The world has yet to see what God *could* do through one man fully surrendered to Christ.” God *can* do anything! regardless of your surrender.

And God “chose what is weak in the world to shame the wise.” Just look at what He did through one, obstinate, stupid, arrogant, insecure fisherman already dead in his trespasses and sins: He caught *you*. On this rock (“petros”) He built His church. And it was 100% Father’s grace.

Awesome results because of Jesus’ awesome obedience.

I don’t know what was going on in Bill’s heart six years ago. I don’t know if I should have given him a call. I don’t know if Bill is with Jesus for sure. I don’t know if God changed Bill’s

life through me forever. If He did, Bill told me how it happened: (I remember hoping at the time that he would recite some awesome obedience on my part . . . a great talk, brilliant insight, sacrificial love. But he didn't.)

Bill told me of a time in Mexico. Our youth group was building a house for a poor family. Bill accidentally bent a nail that he was driving into a board. He tried to hide it as he worked to get the nail straightened. I saw him struggling.

In that instant, he said, he fully expected me to scream at him, maybe hit him . . . because that's what his dad did. But he said, "You didn't. You laughed, made a joke, and showed me how to take the nail out. It was *then* that I first saw the love of my Heavenly Father."

And you see, that was no awesome obedience on my part. It was more like the desperate fling of an insecure youth pastor trying to keep kids in his youth group . . . and maybe it was a little love.

I'm not sure I even remember it. It's kind of like those sheep on judgment day who looked at Jesus and said, "When did we see you hungry or thirsty or naked? When was that?"

Yet now when I get to Heaven and meet Jesus, perhaps Bill Baldrige will walk up, maybe humming an old U2 song. (He did call on the name of Jesus.) And it would not be atypical for Jesus to turn and say, "Hey, Peter, look! It's one of the fish you caught!" And, you see, at that moment it would be 100% grace, for me and for Bill.

So I love Jesus. And sometimes I think I actually *want* to obey Him just because I love Him, fish or not.

I think Jesus is asking you the same question: "Do you love me?" Answer the question for Him. "Do you love me more than these?" If you answered yes, *then* I think He says to you:

"Cherish your wife."
"Honor your husband."
"Nurture your children."
"Love your enemies."
"Die for your friends."
"Stop looking at porn."
"Stop cheating on your taxes."
"Stop gossiping."
"Forgive."
"Pick up your cross and follow me."

Verse 17: *He said to him the third time, "Simon, son of John, do you love me?" Peter was grieved 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.*

Truly, truly, I say to you, when you were young, you girded yourself and walked where you would; but when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and another will gird you and carry you where you do not wish to go." (This he said to show by what death he was to glorify God.) And after this he said to him, "Follow me."

We may die in God's service. But unlike Alexander, Jesus walks off the cliff first . . . and stands at the bottom and catches us.

Legend has it that in 64 A.D. when persecution broke out in Rome, at the urging of the Church Peter fled the city. But on his way out he had a vision of Jesus traveling the other way. He said, "My Lord, where are you going?" Jesus said, "I'm going to Rome to be crucified." At that Peter turned and went back into Rome and was crucified. He "took up his cross and followed."

But I bet Peter didn't think it was an "awesome obedience." I bet he was just "swimming to Jesus." And if it *was* an awesome obedience, it was the result of awesome love, the obedience of Christ.

Wherever you are, in a season of great success or a season of profound failure, or somewhere in between; wherever you are and whoever you are, may you always swim to Jesus. In His name, amen.

Further Reading

And when he had ceased speaking, he said to Simon, "Put out into the deep and let down your nets for a catch." And Simon answered, "Master, we toiled all night and took nothing! But at your word I will let down the nets." And when they had done this, they enclosed a great shoal of fish; and as their nets were breaking, they beckoned to their partners in the other boat to come and help them. And they came and filled both the boats, so that they began to sink. But when Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus' knees, saying, "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord."

-Luke 5:4-8

Peter declared to him, "Though they all fall away because of you, I will never fall away." Jesus said to him, "Truly, I say to you, this very night, before the cock crows, you will deny me three times." Peter said to him, "Even if I must die with you, I will not deny you." And so said all the disciples. . . . After a little while the bystanders came up and said to Peter, "Certainly you are also one of them, for your accent betrays you." Then he began to invoke a curse on himself and to swear, "I do not know the man." And immediately the cock crowed. And Peter remembered the saying of Jesus, "Before the cock crows, you will deny me three times." And he went out and wept bitterly.

-Matthew 26:33-35, 73-75

These biblical characters, however clean or tawdry their personal histories may have been, are not paralyzed by the past in their present response to Jesus. Tossing aside self-consciousness they ran, clung, jumped, and raced to Him. Peter denied Him and deserted Him, but he was not afraid of Him.

Suppose for a moment that in a flash of insight you discovered that all your motives for ministry were essentially egocentric, or suppose that last night you got drunk and committed adultery, or suppose that you failed to respond to a cry for help and the person committed suicide. What would you do?

Would guilt, self-condemnation, and self-hatred consume you, or would you jump into the water and swim a hundred yards at breakneck speed toward Jesus? Haunted by feelings of unworthiness, would you allow the darkness to overcome you or would you let Jesus be who He is—a Savior of boundless compassion and infinite patience, a Lover who keeps no score of our wrongs?

-Brennan Manning

God creates everything out of nothing – and everything which God is to use he first reduces to nothing.

-Soren Kierkegaard

"On earth you cannot measure eternal treasures," Paul said. "When I died, it looked like everything for which I had given my life to building on earth had already perished. The churches I had given my life to raising up were falling into apostasy, and even some of my closest friends were turning against me. During my last days, I felt that I had been a failure."

"Yes, but even I count Paul as a spiritual father," the great conqueror continued, "as do most of us who are here. Most who will come through the great battle of the end will be victorious because he was faithful to stand for truth. You will not measure true spiritual fruit rightly while you are on the earth. You can only measure your true success by how much more clearly you are able to behold the Lord, by how much better you know His voice, and by how much more you love the brethren."

-Rick Joyner, The Call

For consider your call, brethren; not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth; but God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise, God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong, God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God. He is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, whom God made our wisdom, our righteousness and sanctification and redemption; therefore, as it is written, "Let him who boasts, boast of the Lord."

-Paul, I Corinthians 1:26-31

God has not called me to be successful; he has called me to be faithful.

-Mother Teresa

I have to try, but I do not have to succeed. Following Christ has nothing to do with success as the world sees success. It has to do with love. . . . The mistake is in thinking of the journey in terms of success at all (though inevitably we do). Success is one of the dirtiest temptations of the devil.

-Madeleine L'Engle

All that is not the love of God has no meaning for me. I can truthfully say that I have no interest in anything but the love of God which is in Christ Jesus. If God wants it to, my life will be useful through my word and witness. If He wants it to, my life will bear fruit through my prayers and sacrifices. But the usefulness of my life is His concern, not mine. It would be indecent of me to worry about that."

-Father Dominique

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