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Coals of Fire (Oct 1966)

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The night that Peter denied the Lord, he was warming himself at “a fire of coals” (John 18:18), and the day he was restored to usefulness and spiritual happiness, he stood by another “fire of coals” (John 21:9). The moral lessons learned near the glowing embers were never forgotten by this aggressive disciple of the Master.

Peter’s Denial

There were several steps that led to Peter’s denial of Christ. In the first place he was involved in strife over “which of them (the disciples) should be accounted the greatest” (Luke 22:24). In second place, he was so self-confident and proud that he asserted, “Though all men shall be offended because of Thee, yet will I never be offended” (Matt. 26:33). Furthermore, instead of praying when the Lord was in distress, he was sleeping (Matt. 26:40), and this probably led to an act of self-will for we read, “Simon Peter having a sword drew it, and smote the highpriest’s servant, and cut off his right ear” (John 18:10). Peter then followed afar off (Luke 22:54). The climax of these experiences was reached when he denied the Lord saying, “I am not. And the servants and officers stood there, who had made a fire of coals; for it was cold: and they warmed themselves: and Peter stood with them, and warmed himself” (John 18:18). Peter was no longer close enough to the Lord to enjoy fellowship with Him; moreover, such was his condition of mind that he shrank from sharing the sufferings of the Lord.

Step by step Peter had backslidden until he was actually in the company of the enemies of Christ, enjoying the warmth of the fire which they had kindled. It is no wonder that in such surroundings he denied the Lord three times before he realized what he was doing. Only the crowing of the cock and the look of the Master awoke him to his terrible sin. Awakened he was, “And Peter went out, and wept bitterly” (Luke 22:62).

Peter’s Restoration

After Christ’s resurrection (John 21:3), Peter said to the other disciples, “I go a fishing.” They in turn said to him, “We also go with thee.” “That night they caught nothing.” In the morning the Lord Jesus appeared to them and asked if they had any meat; to which question they had to answer no. What an example of the results of self-will in service! But this great lack provided the Lord with an occasion to manifest divine kindness. To them He said, “Cast the net on the right side of the ship, and ye shall find” (John 21:6). “They cast therefore, … and drew the net to land full of great fishes, an hundred and fifty and three” (John 21:7-11). “As soon then as they were come to land, they saw a fire of coals there, and fish laid thereon, and bread” (John 21:9). The Lord knew that fishermen liked to eat of their own catch so He said, “Bring the fish which ye have now caught” (V. 10), and later added, “Come and dine.”

It was after they had dined that Jesus said to Simon Peter, “Simon son of Jonas, lovest thou Me more than these?” In other words, “Peter, do you love Me more than the other disciples; you implied you did? Do you love me more than you do these fish?” Three times did the Lord thus question Peter, and three times did He

follow His question with a commission to feed His sheep, His lambs.

John's Gospel informs us that both of these fires were fires of coals. As Peter sat that morning beside the Master before the second fire, he must have remembered the first one, the fire of coals on the night he denied his Lord. How conscious he would be of his weakness, of his grievious failure! How deeply were his three denials impressed upon him by the three questions asked by the Lord Jesus! How deep the humiliation!

Nevertheless, there were compensations in the commissions he received as he sat by the fire that morning.

The first fire was kindled by the Lord's enemies; the second by the Lord Himself. At the first fire the enemies of the Lord asked Peter questions; at the second, the Lord asked him questions. At the first fire, the enemies brought out the worst in Peter; at the second the Lord brought out the best. When Satan tries a Christian his motive is to expose the worst that is in him. This he tried to do with Job. When the Lord tries a saint, it is to remove the chaff and reveal the best that is in him.

As the Lord in kindness questioned Peter, he was truly humbled, for he appreciated the faithfulness and mercy of the Lord in spite of his sin and frailty.

In his backsliding, Peter did not realize that the Lord knew all things; he had said, "Though all deny Thee, yet will not I." Now he says, "Thou knowest all things, Thou knowest that I love Thee" (John 21:17). Peter used the weaker word for love which only means, I am fond of Thee. He was afraid to use the stronger word; he had learned something of human debility. Now back in

fellowship with the Lord, he knew that he could not trust himself.

How did the Lord really restore Peter? First, by a kind look: “The Lord turned and looked upon Peter” (Luke 22:61). Second, by a kind word: “Go your way, tell His disciples and Peter” (Mark 21:7). Third by a kind deed: “Come and dine” (John 21:12). What a wonderfully great Shepherd! Thank God! He is just the same today; He restores and uses anew those who once had fallen. We can say with the Psalmist, “He restoreth my soul.”

At the fire the enemies of the Lord had kindled, Peter warmed himself, but only his body; at the Lord’s fire, his heart was warmed. Although Peter warmed his flesh at the world’s fire, the warmth did not last. When his heart was warmed at the Lord’s fire, that condition continued and he was mightily used of God. Only a short time afterwards, he stood up with the other eleven disciples and preached the gospel with such power and blessing that three thousand persons were saved (Acts 14:41).

Peter’s heart was restored and stirred as he stood in the Lord’s presence listening to the Lord’s words, appropriating the Lord’s food, and there he received the Lord’s commission, the commission that inspired and directed him throughout the remainder of his life.

Beloved child of God, let each ask himself at which fire he is being warmed. Oh! let us spend time in the presence of God. Let us listen to His word. Let us feed upon His provision. Only then will our hearts be warmed by His fire of coals; only then will our hearts be strengthened by His love. Only then will we receive commissions in Christian service.