

## “Go away from me, Lord, . . .”

The “progression” of a relationship is not easy to measure. People who are close share lots of little moments of connection over seasons, supporting each other in moments of crisis. Looking back at the life of a relationship, friends remember significant events, difficult experiences, times of love, support, and joy. Interestingly, it is rare when a person can pinpoint when their friendship became a “friendship.” Did the friend become a “best friend” after the tenth phone call? Or was it after that long laugh over a not-so-funny joke at 1 a.m. in the morning? Or when the bus stalled outside of town and the two walked forty minutes to the nearest fast-food joint? The very nature of relationship, its progression, makes it difficult to identify a “gelling” moment. Instead, our minds recall punctuated events and we feel a variety of feelings.

In Luke 5:1-11, the gospel writer records a significant moment in the life of Peter, when Jesus calls him into close relationship. This account offers us an example of God’s progression into our lives—a movement from request to challenge and from challenge to surrender.

### **Luke 5:1-11**

**It happened that the crowd was pressing against Jesus to hear the Word of God. He was standing by the lake of Gennesaret. He saw two boats stationed by the lake. The fishermen had left them there and were cleaning their nets.**

**Stepping into one of the boats, the one which was Simon’s, Jesus asked Simon to put out a little from the shore. After Jesus sat down, he taught the crowd from the boat.**

**As he finished speaking, he said to Simon, put out into the deep and lower your nets into the sea. Simon answered and said, “Master, we have labored all night, catching nothing, but because you say so, I will lower the nets.” And having done this, they caught a great multitude of fish, and their nets began to tear. They motioned to their partners in the other boat to come and help them, and they came and filled both boats, which began to sink. Upon seeing this, Simon Peter fell to his knees saying to Jesus, “Go away from me, Lord, because I am a sinful man.” For he was seized with amazement as were James and John, the sons of Zebedee, the partners of Simon, and all of those with him at the amount of fish which they caught.**

**Jesus said to Simon, “Do not fear, from now on you will be a fisher of men.” And after bringing the boats to the shore, they left everything and followed him.**

### **Request**

Gentle waves break against the seaside while fishermen mend their nets spread out over the shoreline. Lake Gennesaret, more commonly called the Sea of Galilee, sits six hundred feet below sea level, ensconced amidst small mountains, in a region dotted with thriving villages. The land around the sea

produces a variety of goods: olives, figs, wine, wheat, barley, sheep, cattle, clothing, and furniture. Fishing also provides a stable income for some, such as Peter, Andrew, James and John, who were likely part of the middle class, managing their own boats and supplying clients and customers with a needed commodity—fresh, dried, and pickled fish. But on this particular day, after an unsuccessful night without a catch, Jesus approaches the fishermen.

With the crowd “pressing against” him to hear the Word of God, Jesus sees an empty boat pulled up upon the bank (a vessel seating at least four men comfortably, probably having a central mast and a triangular sail). People came from all around to hear Jesus teach, in a similar way that they came to hear John the Baptist, but in contrast to John’s style, Jesus went out to the villages and surrounding areas to proclaim his message, with a purpose of discipleship. In fact, it is important not to forget that the more profound act of God in this account is not that Jesus fills an empty boat with an immense number of fish, but that he is the incarnate Son of God walking among men, in flesh and blood, feeling the winds of the sea, seeing what others see, and experiencing the

*God is the “Great Initiator”*

persistent pushiness of needy people. Jesus enters the scene, without hiddenness, revealing the character of the Father, boldly expounding Old Testament Scripture with authority.

Jesus boards Peter’s boat and asks him to put out a little from the shore. The apparent reason that Jesus makes his request to Peter is so that he could teach the crowd

sitting down, using the boat as a pulpit, for sitting was the formal way teachers taught in Christ’s day (see Matt. 5:1). We see the power of Christ through a gentle request as Peter’s commercial vessel became a vehicle for the proclamation of God’s Word.

The forward step into Peter’s boat combined with a kindly asked question reminds me of a friend who worked the Alaskan pipeline. One of his skills was operating a mechanical shovel, the kind with teeth on the end of a large scoop. He became so good at wheeling that scoop around that he could place the scoop with its teeth in any direction at any spot. One day while his coworkers were standing around taking a break, he decided to play a trick on one of the workers whose back was to him. He maneuvered the metal scoop so that one of the teeth fit snugly in the man’s overall back pocket, before the man knew what was happening. My friend got a good laugh from everyone but the coworker. Foolishly, the power from the machine could have broken the man’s back, as could any source of immense power, yet the skill and experience of the operator allowed for precise, gentle movement. Unlike this example, Jesus does not play games with force, but from the authority of the Son of God comes a polite question.

### **Challenge**

Just as he finished speaking, Jesus tells Peter to put out into the deep and lower the nets for a catch. The immediacy in which Jesus moves from teaching to directing Peter reveals the purposefulness of Christ toward Peter. It seems that Peter has been the target all along. Notice that the author, Luke, uses the same word, “put out,” in two different contexts:

when Jesus asks Peter to use the boat, and when Jesus tells Peter to lower the nets:

- v.3 put out a little (question)
- v.4 put out into the deep (command)

This progression involves both movement of degree and of purpose. Jesus first makes a small request, to shove off a little from the shore, and then he expects significant energy, to shove off into the deep to fish—from a little to a lot and from request to challenge. The broached command forces a decision: accept Christ's authority and humbly obey, even though expertise speaks differently, or turn away.

At this point in the narrative, Peter calls Jesus "master," a respectful title that a disciple or someone who might become a disciple would call their teacher. It is a word synonymous with "Rabbi," which means that Peter knew Jesus before this event. Peter explains that no fish were caught after hours and hours of labor during the night (the optimum time to catch fish). But because of Jesus' word, Peter says that he will lower the nets.

Jesus demonstrates his Lordship over Peter's career. After doing what Jesus said, Peter and his partners caught a "great multitude of fish." The weight of the fish began to tear the nets, and both boats were filled so full that the boats started to sink. This act of God gives a physical, visual example to Peter of Christ's nature—his spoken word brings about an "exponential" result. And the human response to his work is astonishment, for all were "seized with amazement." To paraphrase: "These guys were out of their minds with awe" at what just happened.

Such phrases in Scripture like "seized with amazement" remind me of other passages in the New Testament where the authors emphasize the emotions of people in relation to Christ (e.g., Mt. 12:23, Mk. 2:12, 6:51, Lk. 4:36, etc.). One example that explains this point is in Matthew when the wise men saw the star above the infant Jesus' home, they "rejoiced with exceedingly great joy" (Mt. 2:10). "Rejoiced" didn't express it, "great joy" isn't enough to communicate what the wise men felt, but Matthew describes them "rejoicing with exceedingly great joy." God's action results in human amazement. And notice that in the account of Peter's calling that everyone there is seized with amazement, not just Peter.

Simon Peter falls to his knees in recognition of Jesus' authority. He calls Jesus "Lord" and says, "Go away from me, for I am a sinner." These words show the authenticity of Peter's reception of revelation. No longer is Jesus "teacher" but "Lord." His desire to have Jesus move away from him (1) discloses his accurate sense of the holiness of God and (2) reveals his awareness of his own unworthiness. His response parallels the words and actions of other persons in the Bible who have seen the glory of God (e.g., Dt. 5:24, II Chron. 5:14), especially Isaiah. After being brought into the presence of God, Isaiah says, "Lord, I am a man of unclean lips" (Isa. 6:5). So also Peter feels the weight of God's glory and senses his impurity. In essence, God does not expect purity from Peter but trust.

## **Surrender**

Jesus speaks to Peter's reverence, "Do not fear, from now on you will be fishing for men." The real purpose becomes evident in

the passage—a close relationship with Simon Peter. Jesus teaches by the sea not only to communicate truth to local villagers but to net the netter.

After Jesus’ miracle, a revelation of his person, the surrender comes seemingly easy for the four rugged outdoorsmen. The partners “bring” their boats upon the shore, leaving everything to follow him. Luke’s choice of the word “bring” in this sentence shows the natural progression of relationship between Jesus and Peter. Each of the following underlined verbs share the same root verb (agō, meaning to lead or to go out) in Greek:

- v.3 put out a little (request)
- v.4 put out into the deep (challenge)
- v.11 bring the boats (surrender)

By pushing their boats upon the shore, the author emphasizes that Peter, Andrew, James, and John left all that they had worked for in life to fulfill Christ’s mission, to reach the multitudes for him.

### Theological Reflection

When I shared this passage in a class devotion, one of the business students yelled out, “What are you trying to do, tell us that we all need to go into full-time ministry?” I responded, “I assume that God has called you to study business management and that you are going to be the best manager that you can be.” In fact, Scripture is clear about the godliness that comes from working with your own hands, providing for your family, and being at peace with others. Not to mention that 11 of the 12 tribes of Israel were not assigned priestly duties. But even though God doesn’t call a majority into full-time ministry,

he does pursue a relationship with us for full-time surrender. He is in the process of revealing himself to us so that we choose to be in full-time surrender.

Like Peter, a certain level of resistance to Christ’s progression in our lives is natural, because of our sin, because of our insecurities, and because of our perceived need for independence. But he seeks our heart, not perfection, and wants us to focus on his nature.

*He is in the process of revealing himself to us so that we choose to be in full-time surrender.*

One of the first things I learned in systematic theology is that God is the “Great Initiator.” From our perspective, we often think of ourselves as initiating conversation with God, that “we” initiate prayer with him. It is more accurate to realize that God is the one who has brought us to the point where we see our need—then we pray. He involves himself in our circumstances so that we respond to his prompting. In other words, it would be prideful to think that we act first or we love him first before he acts lovingly to us. The gospel writer, Luke, describes the calling of Peter in a way that expresses this truth:

Jesus stands	(v. 1)
he sees	(v. 2)
he enters	(v. 3)
he asks	(v. 3)
he sits, teaches	(v. 4)
he directs	(v. 4)
he calls	(v. 11)

In fact, in first century Jerusalem, it was the disciple who would seek out the opportunity to learn under the Rabbi, not the Rabbi who sought out the disciple. So, contrary to culture, Jesus' actions are aimed at Peter.

One might say that "Peter" is a rare exception, a biblical character, the "Grand Puba" of disciples, and had a special call. A sound argument, except that the character of God does not change, he is impartial, and the progressive nature of God's Spirit in relationship remains the same. When reading the different narratives in the Gospels and Acts about Peter, God continually grew closer to him, requesting, challenging, and bringing about surrender in his life. This dynamic style of relating is not limited to the first disciples but is the way God works in the lives of all of his children.

In other words, Jesus actively targets each of us. He sees us where we are and seeks to utilize our things, talents, and skills to reach others with truth, and he wants to show his power in our lives so that we believe in his mission, one that benefits many. It is likely, that we are in the career that he has for us, but it is important to recognize that he is in the process of revealing himself to us so that we choose to be in full-time surrender. While his progressive nature toward intimacy endures, he acts uniquely in the lives of each of us.

For me, I remember the pivotal point where God brought me to a place of surrender. The powerful miracle was peace, not career gains. It was twenty years ago and my interest in Scripture and my distaste for advertising sales brought me to seek God for direction. At that time, computer screens were green, less than 13 inches in width, and the

cursor, a long dash, constantly blinked. Having just completed graduate school at age 23, I had started a career in marketing, saved a little bit of money, and planned to purchase one of those "high-tech" gismos.

Since my interest in learning about the Bible was increasing, too, I visited with a local pastor and asked him what books or commentaries would be helpful in learning more. He offered a suggestion to pick up some of the NavPress Bible study materials. After purchasing a paperback study guide for Matthew, I remember my inner-thought-prayer to God that if he would find me a reasonably priced computer, I would use it to facilitate the study of his Word.

A few weeks later, one of my former professors and his wife invited me over for dinner. At the table, he let me know that he had purchased a new computer, and wanted to know if I would be interested in buying his other one, a large off-white horizontal desk top which had been used in his school office. Not knowing much about computers, except that they were expensive, I asked him, "How much?"

He said, "Three."

"Three thousand?" I asked.

"No, three hundred," he replied.

I said, "Sure."

What was amazing about this transaction was not that I purchased a quality computer two weeks after an inner prayer, but that within in a few months that computer was sitting on a desk in student housing where I began Seminary training. God hadn't increased my sales exponentially to show me that he was Lord over my career, but he did let me feel his

peace as I followed his challenge to begin preparation to take the gospel to the lost and build up the body of Christ. He had my skills and possessions in mind from the beginning, moving me into closer relationship.

### **Personal Response**

Most of us want to hear God and participate in furthering his purposes. We know that he is at work, but we may not be aware that he is standing nearby, facilitating his Word, with an eye on us, watching us carry out our daily activities.

### **Request**

God nudges us and gently reminds people of areas or possessions that he wants for his use. It may help to see this aspect of him as him giving us a valuable opportunity to participate in furthering his Word. (He doesn't really need our things.)

### **Challenge**

God's direct commands are heard within the heart, in agreement with Scripture, often followed by confirming circumstances, leaving little doubt as to what he means. These inner imperatives challenge the believer to forgo conventional wisdom in one's area of expertise, precipitating an acceptance or rejection of Christ's authority, a choice of obedience rather than pride. Ask God to clear away any distraction from hearing his challenge for your life and pray for courage and faith to obey what he says.

### **Surrender**

The progression of God is total and ongoing. He seeks to own all of our hearts, to

bring about life and freedom with a maximum return for others. But he does not ask us to give up our lives to him without revealing his power. As made known by his death on the cross and his resurrection, he will also supernaturally demonstrate his authority in the very area of our life which he wants us to give to him. This makes the decision a realistic step and part of a natural progression.

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