

THE HEALTHY SOUL, PART 7: STALLING OUT

John 20:24-21:19 (NASB)

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In the Gospel of John, chapter 21, we find the disciples sitting on the shore of the Sea of Galilee, also called the Sea of Tiberias, awash in the most familiar sights and sounds. The gentle lapping of the water, wafts of air which alternately brought the smells of earth, animals grazing nearby, lake water, fish heads and skeletons which had been discarded, and perhaps musky smells of their own. Jesus' earthly ministry was over, and they had come full circle to a place where Jesus had ministered often, and where many of them had been called to follow him.

They had indeed followed him, said and done amazing things by the power of God, and seen him crucified, buried, and risen from the dead. He had already come back to visit them in his resurrected body, so they knew that all of his teachings were true. And yet--they were temporarily stalled out, filled with uncertainty about what to do next. Shall we condemn them for this? I cannot, since I have been right where they were at that moment, and I think that if you have been following Christ for a while, you have, too.

ISSUES WHICH CAUSE US TO STALL OUT

What are some of the issues which cause us to stall out? First of all, like the disciples, those of us who have believed in him have had a powerful and true experience of his reality. And yet he remains invisible. It was so much easier for the disciples to follow him when he was present with them in body. He would say: "Let's go to the next town," and they would go. As the disciples sat on the shore of the Sea of Galilee, they were experiencing a megashift into something we experience as normal. They were suddenly following an invisible King, and all invisible things seem unreal to us. A new uncertainty was upon them, and they ground to a halt.

Secondly, like many of us, they had done a lot of ministry in three intense years and were tired. Uncertainty inevitably comes on the wings of exhaustion, and we wonder if we have been doing the right things. Have you not experienced the unwelcome intrusion of confused thoughts during times of great weariness? We can also become unsure of what to do next. Peter, the natural leader, broke the mood and announced: "**I am going fishing.**" The others thought for a moment and agreed to come. Did this mean that they were abandoning their commission from Christ? I do not think so. Remember that the support of Jesus' earthly ministry came from donations, and that work had been over since the crucifixion. It would have been natural for the support to have faltered. Even when exhausted we all have to eat, so they went fishing.

Thirdly, they are like us in that they had his explicit commands about their mission and yet their circumstances made them uncertain about doing it. They were still getting over the fact that Christ did not usher in his earthly kingdom immediately. On top of that, most of the visible disciples disappeared at the crucifixion. We, on the other hand, have faced the decline of the church in the West for many years. To counter this we have published numberless books urging church leaders to adopt novel theories of church growth. We have churches which incorporate line dancing on Sunday mornings,

cowboy church where everyone rides in on horses, preaching to people through the radio as they sit in their cars at the drive in, and many such things.

I understand the impulse completely. I'm not sure there is anything wrong with the things I just mentioned—unless they indicate that human preferences have been given the place of sovereignty. It engenders a feeling of desperation when we keep doing the things Jesus has told us to do yet we see vast numbers of Christians walk away from the church. It can make you stall out.

Fourthly, like Peter and Thomas, we have all done things no Christian should ever do. Peter bluntly denied the Lord three times. Thomas became so discouraged by the death of Christ that he dropped out of the fellowship for a while and was not even present for Christ's first post-resurrection appearances. But by the time the disciples were by the Sea of Galilee, pushing their boats into the water to go fishing, Christ had already come to them to heal those breaches. And yet, as we all know, those personal failures raise our level of uncertainty. We wonder: *Can God still use me? What if I fail again? Perhaps I should move to the fringes of the church and just keep my head down.*

The disciples were in a condition which would have been very familiar to the fishermen among them. First century fishing boats were generally rowed from place to place, but they often had sails as well. These fishermen would have used the wind whenever possible. But sailing requires wisdom. It is a fascinating bit of physics that the sail will drive the boat quite a ways into an oncoming wind--so long as you do not try to go directly into it. A pilot might steer too close to the wind if the shoreline is forcing him, or if the point of the wind keeps shifting. But facing the wind too directly stalls the sailboat out, the sail goes limp and begins to flap, and all rudder control is lost. The sailing term is that the boat is "in irons." The boat begins to be pushed randomly away from the wind. At that moment the skipper must do something affirmative to correct the problem. The easiest thing to do is stand up, grab the randomly swinging boom, and shove it and the sail into the wind. This will make the boat turn, usually backwards, but then it will be at an angle which will sail.

The same is true of uncertainty of soul for a believer in Christ. It is a dangerous and unhealthy condition in which we are stalled out and at the mercy of external forces until we take affirmative action. Other lost people, our own sinful tendencies, and demonic influences will shove us where we do not wish to go while we drift. And that is the rub. It is hard to act decisively when we are filled with uncertainty. But no other solution will work, and no one can do it for us. Several accounts at the end of John's gospel provide us with specific actions we can take to sail our way out of the dangerous waters of uncertainty.

PURSUE AN ENCOUNTER WITH JESUS

Shortly before the gathering of disciples on the beach in Galilee the man we have come to call "doubting Thomas" had his pivotal encounter with Jesus. Thomas was neither a bad man nor a skeptic, but a man whose faith was coming apart at the seams because of the crucifixion. We have not been provided with enough information to analyze his problem, but we have been told how his faith was solidified, namely, by a personal encounter with Jesus. We pick up his story at John 20:24: "**But Thomas, one of the twelve, called Didymus, was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples were saying to him, 'We have seen the Lord!' But he said to them, 'Unless I see in His hands the imprint of the nails, and put my finger into the place of the nails, and put my hand into**

His side, I will not believe.' After eight days His disciples were again inside, and Thomas with them. Jesus came, the doors having been shut, and stood in their midst and said, 'Peace be with you.' Then He said to Thomas, 'Reach here with your finger, and see My hands; and reach here your hand and put it into My side; and do not be unbelieving, but believing.' Thomas answered and said to Him, 'My Lord and my God!' Jesus said to him, 'Because you have seen Me, have you believed? Blessed are they who did not see, and yet believed'" (John 20:24-29).

Seeing Jesus Christ personally changed everything for Thomas. Now, if you are like me, you feel sad that Jesus does not show up in the flesh for you. But the Apostle John, in the very next verses tells us how to encounter Jesus Christ so that we may solidify our faith as well: **"Therefore many other signs Jesus also performed in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these have been written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you may have life in His name"** (John 20:30-31). We may not have the physical person of the glorified Jesus to solidify our faith, but we have the word of God which is completely sufficient to do the same thing.

The regular encounter with Jesus Christ in his word, the Bible, has the effect of washing the poison of uncertainty out of our souls. The means is at our disposal if we will use it! The Bible is our chapel, our meeting place with Christ. God himself has told us that this is so. And since God invites us to have a dynamic communication with him, not just a theological tutorial, we should start our Bible reading with prayer. Welcome Jesus into your thoughts and heart, and ask him to speak to you through his word. If you are like me, you may need to start with a stretch of healthy confession to get the sin barriers out of your heart so the word won't just bounce off. We should think of such times of devotional Bible reading as visits with a person rather than merely an intellectual pursuit. Seeing Jesus in this way will make our faith solid and sound. Thomas' statement of doubt was: **"Unless I see...I will not believe."** If that describes you--then go see!

This is God's sweet promise, as spoken through the prophet Jeremiah to the people of Israel: **"You will seek Me and find Me when you search for Me with all your heart"** (Jeremiah 29:13). And when you do, you will find yourself on your knees like Thomas, crying out in faith: **"My Lord and my God!"**

ENGAGE YOUR MINISTRY

Immediately after Thomas' encounter with Jesus the disciples found themselves back at the beach, heading out to fish. They fished all night and caught nothing. Have you ever felt that way about your ministry, your job, parenting, or any major effort? Then some guy on the shoreline whom the disciples did not recognize called out to these professionals to cast their net on the other side of the boat. It would be silly to think that fish would be on one side and not the other, but they obeyed and caught a fish load so great that their nets were endangered. John was the first to realize that this could only be the work of Christ, and said: **"It is the Lord."** Peter immediately swam back to shore to greet Jesus, and then Jesus made breakfast for them all. This was the third time he had appeared to them after his resurrection.

Jesus then turned his attention upon Peter, with whom the breach caused by betrayal had already been healed. And yet the public nature of the betrayal no doubt left Peter wondering: *I know I love him,*

but won't this relationship be damaged from now on? Is there really such a thing as total forgiveness? And how can I fulfill the commands he has given me to build his kingdom in light of my failure? Unless you are a perfect follower of Christ who has never done anything as a believer with which you are ashamed, you know exactly the same uncertainty Peter was feeling.

Jesus, the Great Physician, then went to work on Peter: **"So when they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, 'Simon, son of John, do you love Me more than these?' He said to Him, 'Yes, Lord; You know that I love You.' He said to him, 'Tend My lambs.' He said to him again a second time, 'Simon, son of John, do you love Me?' He said to Him, 'Yes, Lord; You know that I love You.' He said to him, 'Shepherd My sheep.' 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 all things; You know that I love You.' Jesus said to him, 'Tend My sheep'"** (John 21:15-17).

This was heart surgery! What a wonderful encouragement the Lord gave to Peter by saying, in effect: "I'm not going to discard you." The specific prescription Jesus gave Peter to stabilize and confirm his love for the Lord whom he had betrayed was that Peter engage the ministry he had been given.

This is necessary for you and I also. We were made to be under sail, not drifting dangerously across the sea of life. Every believer has been given a spiritual gift, and that means God intends us all to be engaged in some ministry appropriate to that gift. Are you feeling adrift spiritually? Find a way to serve the Lord and go do it! Don't wait to be asked, or for an angel to arrive with instructions. Abundant blessing will be yours, but especially you will stabilize your love for Christ by that service. You already have your instructions, and the fresh work of the Holy Spirit in your life is awaiting your obedience, as Jesus said: **"He who has My commandments and keeps them is the one who loves Me; and he who loves Me will be loved by My Father, and I will love him and will disclose Myself to him"** (John 14:21). Peter's later life is a testimony to that truth.

EMBRACE CHRIST'S LEADERSHIP

This encounter immediately turned to a discussion of Peter's future, about which Jesus said: **"Truly, truly, I say to you, when you were younger, you used to gird yourself and walk wherever you wished; but when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands and someone else will gird you, and bring you where you do not wish to go.' Now this He said, signifying by what kind of death he would glorify God. And when He had spoken this, He said to him, 'Follow Me!'"** (John 21:18-19). Peter's future would glorify God instead of disgracing him. What a great reason for hope! But it would come at the cost of a death just like his Lord's, most likely crucifixion for the same reason. Jesus invited Peter to mobilize his hope in him by embracing Christ's leadership. Following Jesus, come what may, would be the way that God would be glorified.

We have the same opportunity to leave the doldrums of uncertainty by mobilizing our hope in Christ by following him. If he has told us to preach and teach the entire word of God, come what may, we cannot countenance the idea of hiding parts of it so we will have an easier time in a world which is falling into the pit of spiritual darkness. Straightforwardness is what Christ did, as did every prophet

and every apostle. We follow the beat of the Lord's drum and do not look back to see if we are in sync with people who are not following Christ.

At the 2008 Olympics in Beijing the women's marathon was won by Romanian Constantina Tomescu Dita. The racers ran together for the first half of the race, and then Constantina took off. She widened the gap to such a large lead that the cameras could no longer get the front runners in the same shot. For most of the remaining thirteen miles Constantina did not even look back to see where the other runners were. She had her wristwatch and some kind of little tablets tucked under her waistband which she would pull out and eat. Her focus until shortly before the end--when she finally took a look--was to run her own race at her own pace and focus relentlessly on the goal, disregarding what the others were doing. Jesus tells us to do the same thing: "**You follow me!**" A relentless focus on him is how we will mobilize our hope and win the race of life.

Are you stalled out in your faith walk? Is your sail flapping and your boat adrift? It is time for you to stand up in your boat, grab the boom, and push your sail into the wind! Your assertive action in the face of uncertainty is the only way to regain drive in your soul for the things of God. And the alternative is for you to spend life drifting into one random thing after the next like flotsam. Jesus beckons you to pursue an encounter with him in his word, to engage your ministry, and to embrace his leadership. The Holy Spirit will fill your sails! This is the privilege and birthright of every genuine believer.

If you have never done anything but drift you may not yet be born again. Some of us agree with the teaching of Christ and yet we have never turned our wills over to the Lord. There can be no drive for God in a person's soul without the transforming work of the Holy Spirit. If that describes you, I invite you to pray this prayer: "Lord Jesus, I am adrift. I have been piloting the ship of my life on my own. I admit that I am a sinner. Cleanse me of my sins, and then do your transforming work within me. I choose to receive your Holy Spirit. Lord, take the tiller and steer my ship. Amen."