

# CONVERSATIONS with JESUS



## QUESTIONS FOR CONVERSATIONS WITH JESUS #5 John 21:15-25

1. Was anything in particular clarified for you in this message?
2. A common traditional view claims the key to this text is found in the two verbs for “love” (*Agapao* and *Philo*). Can you explain (a) what this view claims, and (b) why it is problematic?
3. The name “*Simon son of John*” three times is a critical part of our Lord’s bringing him to repentance. Can you explain how/why that is?
4. Peter said “*Lord, you know all things*”. Why is this a significant issue?
5. “*Jesus demands a change in the behavior of everyone he forgives*”. Discuss.
6. “*The Bible is unambiguous ... without repentance there is no forgiveness*”. Discuss this and its implications. (See Isaiah 55:7, Luke 13:3 & 5, 1 John 1:8-9)
7. Peter denied Jesus while warming himself round a fire with unbelievers. Do you think this is significant?
8. Politicizing the Bible (as a member of the US Congress did recently) is a serious mistake. Why?
9. “*A text without its context is a pretext*”. Can you describe some examples of likely damage arising from misquoted Scripture?
10. “*A man’s fundamental problem is not the evil he does (as monstrous as it may be) --- it is his absence of love for God*”. Discuss (see Psalm 36:1, Mark 12:30).

## “DO YOU LOVE ME?”

(Conversations with Jesus, John 21:15-25)

I can scarcely imagine a more critical issue than for the Son of God to look a man in the eye and ask: “*Do you love me?*” As we think about that let’s consider ...

1. The issue for Peter, 2. The claims of Jesus, and 3. The implications for us.

### 1. The issue for Peter

We can understand why Peter “*was hurt because Jesus asked him the third time, do you love me?*” (John 21:17). He had broken down and wept after denying Jesus three times, and now he is confronted with it again. He had boasted it could never happen, that he loved Jesus more than the other disciples did: “*Even if all fall away, I will not.*” So the three questions followed three denials, but the real issue for Peter is more pointed, and to get at that issue I need to steer you away from a popular traditional interpretation. It focuses on the two different Greek words for “love” used here. The following table will help.

	Question (Jesus)	Answer (Peter)
<b>1</b>	<b>Agapao</b>	<b>Philo</b>
<b>2</b>	<b>Agapao</b>	<b>Philo</b>
<b>3</b>	<b>Philo</b>	<b>Philo</b>

The verb Jesus used is *agapao* while Peter used *philo*. It is claimed that *Agapao* is stronger love, better love, the love that God himself has, while *philo* is weaker love, mere human love, brotherly love or friendship. Twice Jesus asked using *agapao* but Peter kept using *philo* each time. So when Jesus used Peter’s word (*philo*) in the third question it is seen as a way of prompting him to use the other word ... ‘*Simon, do you only love me in that weaker sense? Don’t you love me in the stronger sense? You keep saying **philo**, why not **agapao**? You say I am your friend - is that as far as it goes? Do you really love me?*’ Some English Bibles reflect that view by translating *agapao* as “truly love” while *philo* is simply “love”. But it is problematic for several reasons.

1) It makes the whole episode a monumental failure. Peter didn’t change his word even after Jesus changed his. He used *philo* each time. If Peter won this debate and Jesus failed to get the answer he demanded, the theological implications are serious.

2) The New Testament simply does not tolerate the view that *agape* love is somehow ‘better’ than *philo* love. It often uses the two words interchangeably. Any solid commentary will put you in touch with the vast literature on this. Two examples will illustrate for now.

First, consider John 5:20... “*For the Father loves the Son and shows him all he does*”. No love could be better or stronger. If the tradition was right we’d expect the word to be *agapao* ... but it isn’t ... the word is ***philo***!

Secondly, which word would you expect for the sinful love condemned by Jesus: *“Woe to you Pharisees! For you love the most important seats in the synagogues, and greetings in the market places”* (Luke 11:43)? The traditional view would expect *Philo*, but in fact it is **agapao**! Big problem! Why would Jesus use the most refined word for ‘love’ to describe despicable love? So what **is** the real issue for Peter?

It hangs on what Jesus repeatedly called him ... *“Simon son of John”*. What’s in a name? A great deal in this case. Simon is his birth name, his pre-Christian name. But Jesus changed his name to Peter to mark his new life, his new commitment and his new faith as a disciple of the Messiah. When he first came to faith *“Jesus looked at him, and said, you are Simon the son of John; you shall be called Cephas (which is translated Peter)”* (John 1:42). It happened again later when Peter made his important declaration: *“You are the Christ, the Son of the living God”*.

Jesus responded: *“Blessed are you, Simon son of John, because this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven. And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church; and the gates of Hades will not overcome it”* (Matt 16:17-18). Peter is his name as a faithful confessing Christian but Jesus now refuses to call him by that name. In effect Jesus is saying ...

*‘Simon, where is that new name I gave you, the new name to go with your new nature and new life and new love? I call you again by your old pre-Christian name because that fits your recent behaviour. You denied me three times. Simon son of John, can I ever call you Peter the believer again? Simon the denier, can I ever call you Peter the confessor? Simon, do you love me? Simon, are you **Peter**?’* That’s the issue. He is confronted with his sin and it hurts. But it is a necessary step in our Lord’s gracious forgiveness and restoration. There is no forgiveness without repentance.

## 2. The claims of Jesus

#1. Jesus is God incarnate, as Peter acknowledged in his third answer *“Lord, you know all things”*. This can only be a confession of Christ’s Deity. If Jesus is only a man the statement is false ... no mere man knows *“all things”*. No human nature is omniscient. No mere man has divine attributes. But Jesus does because he is Emmanuel, God with us. Jesus is the all-knowing God! That truth is essential to Christianity. To love Christ properly is to love him as the God-man. If Jesus wanted to draw out a strong statement of love from Peter, he certainly succeeded, and it has nothing to do with semantic differences between Greek words.

#2. Jesus demands a change in the behaviour of everyone he forgives. Forgiveness is free but not cheap. Peter (the new man in Christ) cannot still live like Simon (the old pre-Christian man). Jesus has the right to be Lord and master of our entire lives. The staggering thing here is that Simon had been literally arguing the point with Jesus! That had to stop. *“This is love for God: to obey his commands. And his commands are not burdensome”* (1 John 5:3). Peter was graciously restored to loving obedience.

#3. Jesus does not have identical plans for every disciple. His plans for John were not the same as for Peter ... indeed it was none of Peter’s business! In enigmatic terms (verses 18-24) Jesus predicted Peter’s martyrdom (crucifixion indicated by stretched out hands, and carrying his own cross indicated by being ‘dressed’ and led where he

didn't want to go). We are all different and used differently in serving the king. Let us encourage each other in those differences as we glory in our common faith and allegiance. None of us should feel superior to another ... such rivalry was at the heart of the initial problem here. But this encounter with Jesus changed all that, as we see in Acts 4. Peter and John are preaching the gospel (feeding the sheep) together and were jailed together for that. It is wonderful to read how the people "*saw the courage of Peter and John and realized that they were unschooled, ordinary men ... and they took note that these men had been with Jesus*" (Acts 4:13).

### 3. The implications for us

#1. Peter answered well, but how would we fare? Suppose Christ came into this room today, walking down the aisle, looking intently into each and every face. Suppose He fixed his eyes upon you and asked "*Do you love me?*" Could you say like Peter: "*Lord I'm glad you know all things as you search me. I rest my case on your unerring knowledge: you know I love you*". Or would Christ see a sham religion, a pretence and hypocrisy? So much is at stake.

#2. Our supreme authority must be only the word of God (properly interpreted). No doubt Peter sincerely intended to be the last man standing ... he felt strongly about loyalty to Jesus, but intentions are not authoritative. History shows numerous cases of sincere well-meaning people arguing contrary to the word of God ... even using Scripture to do it!

For example, just a few weeks ago I was in America when a Congressman cited Romans 13:1 to defend the wretched Presidential action of separating children from their families at the US border. No doubt he was sincere and meant well ... but it dishonored Christ, misused the Bible, and brought discredit to all Christians. Journalists jumped all over it and (rightly) showed how the same text has been used to defend such things as slavery, and Hitler's third Reich. One reporter pointed out that though she was not a Bible believer she knew that 3 verses later governments are described as "*God's servant to do you good*" and if governments do evil then "*we must obey God rather than men*" (Acts 4). How tragic when non-Christians have a better hermeneutic than Christians! Knowing how to interpret the Bible is critical.

#3. The greatest commandment still applies - "*Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength*" (Mark 12:30). Is that how it is for us? Is that what Jesus sees as he searches our heart? The most severe penalty awaits every unsatisfactory answer to "Do you love me?"

"*If anyone does not love the Lord let him be accursed!*" (1 Cor 16:22). Jesus does not ask pointless questions. Are you blessed or cursed? That's what it amounts to. I cannot answer for you nor you for me. We must answer for ourselves sooner or later, and the sooner the better. If you were charged with being a follower of Jesus, would there be enough evidence to convict you? May God grant it!