

A Charcoal Fire

by Forrest C. Gilmore

Rocky Johnson Intro

Today, I want to tell you a story about one of my favorite Bible characters. His name is Rocky Johnson. Now, everyone may not know who that is, so turn with me to Matthew Chapter 16.

Matthew 16:13-18 (NASB)

¹³ Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, He was asking His disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?"

¹⁴ And they said, "Some *say* John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; but still others, Jeremiah, or one of the prophets."

¹⁵ He *said to them, "But who do you say that I am?"

¹⁶ Simon Peter answered, "You are the The Anointed One, the Son of the living God."

¹⁷ And Jesus said to him, "Blessed are you, Simon Barjona, because flesh and blood did not reveal *this* to you, but My Father who is in heaven.

¹⁸ "I also say to you that you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build My church; and the gates of Hades will not overpower it.

In verse 18, Jesus say to Peter, "You are Petros," which means 'rock or stone.' In verse 17, Jesus said, "Blessed are you Simon Barjona," using Peter's Aramaic, or Hebrew name, Simon. Barjona means 'Son of John;" we would say "Johnson." So we can call Peter, Rock, or Rocky Johnson! Rocky was perhaps Jesus' favorite nickname for Simon. In His omniscience, Jesus knew that Simon was a Rock, just like He was.

Jesus had asked His disciples, "Who do people say that I am?" Then He asked, "But who do YOU say that I am?" Some theologians say that this is perhaps the most important question that can be asked. Rocky responded, "You are the Anointed One, the Son of the living God." Let's look for a moment at what Jesus told Peter. "You are *Petros*, and on this *petra* I will build my church. The Greek word 'Petros' is masculine and means "a stone." The word 'petra' means 'a large rock, or bedrock' and is feminine. So we Protestants understand that Jesus was building his church on the confession that Peter made, and the one that each of us makes when we come to believe in Jesus. I ask each of you today, have you made this confession of faith? Whom do you say that Jesus is?

The New Testament makes it clear that Peter, along with the two sons of Zebedee, James and John, were Jesus' closest disciples and three of the twelve that we call Apostles. Peter seems to have been the leader, but that may be because he was the one who most often spoke up or took action when certain events happened. John was the one who seemed to be closest to Jesus in a personal way, and he also seemed to have a more spiritual insight into the Lord's teachings and ministry. He gives us some interesting insights into certain events that transpired between Rocky and Jesus.

Jesus predicts Peter's denial

Let's look first at a moment that transpired at the Last Supper.

John 13:33-38 (NASB)

³³ "Little children, I am with you a little while longer. You will seek Me; and as I said to the Jews, now I also say to you, 'Where I am going, you cannot come.'

³⁴ "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. ³⁵ "By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another."

³⁶ Simon Peter *said to Him, "Lord, where are You going?" Jesus answered, "Where I go, you cannot follow Me now; but you will follow later."

³⁷ Peter *said to Him, "Lord, why can I not follow You right now? I will lay down my life for You." ³⁸ Jesus *answered, "Will you lay down your life for Me? Truly, truly, I say to you, a rooster will not crow until you deny Me three times.

Jesus' time was short. He was preparing His closest friends for His impending death. He spoke of the need for sharing unconditional love among themselves – it would be the sign of His presence in their lives. He also spoke frankly. As Rocky spoke up, as he tended to do, Jesus said, "Rocky, do you really mean what you are saying? Probably not, because before you hear the next cock crow, you will deny me three times.

Peter denies Jesus three times

Now, let's look at the incident where Rocky denied that he was a disciple of Jesus. I wish to read this from the NASB, because it is a more word-accurate translation, and there is a particular nuance in the wording here that we need to see. You recall that Jesus was arrested in the garden of Gethsemane and taken to various Jewish authorities for questioning. I'll begin reading at John 18:15:

John 18:12-27 (NASB)

¹⁵ Simon Peter was following Jesus, and *so was* another disciple. Now that disciple was known to the high priest, and entered with Jesus into the court of the high priest,

¹⁶ but Peter was standing at the door outside. So the other disciple, who was known to the high priest, went out and spoke to the doorkeeper, and brought Peter in.

¹⁷ Then the slave-girl who kept the door *said to Peter, "You are not also *one* of this man's disciples, are you?" He *said, "I am not."

¹⁸ Now the slaves and the officers were standing *there*, having made a charcoal fire, for it was cold and they were warming themselves; and Peter was also with them, standing and warming himself.

¹⁹ The high priest then questioned Jesus about His disciples, and about His teaching.

Here, I'll skip to verse 25:

²⁵ Now Simon Peter was standing and warming himself. So they said to him, "You are not also *one* of His disciples, are you?" He denied *it*, and said, "I am not."

²⁶ One of the slaves of the high priest, being a relative of the one whose ear Peter cut off, *said, "Did I not see you in the garden with Him?"

²⁷ Peter then denied *it* again, and immediately a rooster crowed.

So, in spite of the fact that Rocky was a close companion of Jesus, when the situation seemed threatening, he chose to deny that relationship.

You know where the story goes from there: Jesus is accused of blasphemy, an offense that the Jews felt was deserving of death, and also of treason, which was deserving of death by the Romans, so He was crucified and died on the cross. But on the third day, Jesus rose from the tomb and subsequently was seen several times by various ones of His followers. Let's look at one specific event, described in John 21:

The seaside breakfast scene

John 21:1-14 (NASB)

¹ After these things Jesus manifested Himself again to the disciples at the Sea of Tiberias, and He manifested *Himself* in this way.

² Simon Peter, and Thomas called Didymus, and Nathanael of Cana in Galilee, and the *sons* of Zebedee, and two others of His disciples were together.

³ Simon Peter *said to them, "I am going fishing." They *said to him, "We will also come with you." They went out and got into the boat; and that night they caught nothing.

⁴ But when the day was now breaking, Jesus stood on the beach; yet the disciples did not know that it was Jesus.

⁵ So Jesus *said to them, "Children, you do not have any fish, do you?" They answered Him, "No."

⁶ And He said to them, "Cast the net on the right-hand side of the boat and you will find *a catch*." So they cast, and then they were not able to haul it in because of the great number of fish.

⁷ Therefore that disciple whom Jesus loved *said to Peter, "It is the Lord." So when Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he put his outer garment on (for he was stripped *for work*), and threw himself into the sea.

⁸ But the other disciples came in the little boat, for they were not far from the land, but about one hundred yards away, dragging the net *full* of fish.

⁹ So when they got out on the land, they *saw a charcoal fire *already* laid and fish placed on it, and bread.

¹⁰ Jesus *said to them, "Bring some of the fish which you have now caught."

¹¹ Simon Peter went up and drew the net to land, full of large fish, a hundred and fifty-three; and

although there were so many, the net was not torn.

¹² Jesus *said to them, "Come *and* have breakfast." None of the disciples ventured to question Him, "Who are You?" knowing that it was the Lord.

¹³ Jesus *came and *took the bread and *gave *it* to them, and the fish likewise.

¹⁴ This is now the third time that Jesus was manifested to the disciples, after He was raised from the dead.

This is a very interesting passage, and John has given us some clues that we need to consider. First, note that in verse 14 we are told that this was the third time that Jesus was manifested to His disciples. Whenever John uses the term "third time" or "third day," it's a sign that something of spiritual significance, what I call a "God-event," is about to happen. Note that he tells us that only a few disciples are mentioned here. Rocky was there, and the two sons of Zebedee were there also, one of whom was John, who tended to refer to himself as the disciple whom Jesus loved. Two others are named – Thomas and Nathanael – and there are two un-named disciples. Why are we not given the names of these two? Well, perhaps John just listed them so that the number would add up to 7, which is a number of special significance, meaning wholeness, completeness, or spiritual perfection. John uses it in many places in his Gospel.

Another possibility might be that John is using the well-known Hebrew idea of two witnesses to confirm the fact that he was there.

Another interesting fact is that John tells us the exact number of fish that were caught – 153. That's a rather odd number, and over the centuries there have been many wide-ranging and fanciful attempts to demonstrate the meaning of this number. In my mind, this number is just another clue, in addition to knowing exactly how many disciples were there, that is used by John to tell us that he was there personally.

Now, let's look at what happened next. In the next few sentences, Two different Greek words in the original texts are translated "love." One word is *agapao*, which signifies an unconditional type of love. The other is *phileo*, which means love as shared among family members. As I read the next few passages, I will try to make it clear when each of these two words is used.

John 21:15-17 (FCG transliteration)

¹⁵ So when they had finished breakfast, Jesus *said to Simon Peter, "Simon, Son of John, do you love Me unconditionally and more than these other six disciples?" He *said to Him, "Yes, Lord; You know that I love You like a brother." He *said to him, "Tend My lambs."

¹⁶ He *said to him again a second time, "Simon Johnson, do you love Me unconditionally?" He *said to Him, "Yes, Lord; You know that I love You like a brother." He *said to him, "Shepherd My sheep."

¹⁷ He *said to him the third time, "Simon Johnson, do you love Me like a brother?" Peter was grieved because He said to him the third time, "Do you love Me like a brother?" And he said to Him, "Lord, You know all things; You know that I love You like a brother." Jesus *said to him, "Tend My sheep."

I hope that you can see that Jesus was expecting Rocky to have a relationship that was deeper than Rocky was ready for. Jesus didn't even use His favorite name, Rocky – he called him Simon. I hope that you noticed one other special insight that John gives us. He tells us in verse 9 that the group was seated around a charcoal fire. The Greek word here is *anthrakia*, and it is used only one other time in Scripture, in the passage we just read from John 18:18, where Rocky denied that he was a disciple of Jesus.

So now, I want you to put yourself into this scene and try to feel what Rocky probably was sensing. As he felt the warmth of the fire, he probably remembered the last time he felt the warmth of a charcoal fire. The man whom he had followed through some tough times over the past three years was now with them for perhaps the last time, and He was asking Him personally, do you love me as God loves you? Rocky was crushed. The root of the Greek word describing his feeling has the sense of pain. “How do you feel? Have you felt the warmth of the fire that Jesus wants you to have in your heart?”

Now some scholars like to point out that the Greek scriptures are somehow contrived here, because Jesus certainly spoke to the group in Aramaic, where there is only one word for “love.” Others suggest that the words *phileo* and *agapao* were used interchangeably. I counter this argument by saying that Jesus probably used other Aramaic words to clarify His meaning, just as I did in the transliteration that I read to you. I'm pretty sure that Rocky understood the difference, and I believe I can prove it. Look at

1 Peter 1:22-23 (NASB)

²² Since you have in obedience to the truth purified your souls for a sincere love of the brethren (*phileo*), fervently love one another from the heart (*agapao*),

²³ for you have been born again not of seed which is perishable but imperishable, *that is*, through the living and enduring word of God.

Here, Rocky uses both words, *phileo* and *agapao* to distinguish two levels of caring.

We see it again in **2 Peter 1:4-7 (NASB)** As I read this, notice the gradual increase in spiritual maturity Peter is describing:

⁴ ·He has granted to us His precious and magnificent promises, so that by them you may become partakers of *the* divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world by lust.

⁵ Now for this very reason also, applying all diligence, in your faith supply moral excellence, and in *your* moral excellence, knowledge, ⁶ and in *your* knowledge, self-control, and in *your* self-control, perseverance, and in *your* perseverance, godliness,

⁷ and in *your* godliness, brotherly kindness (*phileo*), and in *your* brotherly kindness, love (*agapao*).

Thus, as he sat around that charcoal fire, the Rock got the message, and in the book of Acts, we see how his life was changed. “Peter was asked about his love for Christ three times perhaps because he denied the Lord three times. [Jesus] was telling him, "If you love me, then serve me.""

It's one thing to say you love the Lord. The real test is your willingness to serve Him.” (Mattoon)

Jesus was telling Rocky, “You may have denied Me in the past, but now, all is forgiven, and I need you to step up to the plate and serve me, by taking care of my sheep.” And that is exactly what Peter did. Twenty years or so later, we see Paul describing Peter as one of the pillars of Christ's body in the world.

Jesus asks each of us a question

In Luke 14:26-33, Jesus told His followers that to be His disciple, they must first deny themselves all earthly pleasures, then come and follow Him. In other words, Jesus must be our first priority.

Even today, Jesus asks us this question -- "Will you be my disciple?"

Let's return to the charcoal fire a moment. Charcoal is basically the carbon that is left when wood or coal have been burned and stripped of its more volatile elements – the substances that burn readily. So a charcoal fire is one in which the carbon embers themselves are burning. An interesting thing about a charcoal fire is that the embers won't burn alone – they need other embers to keep the temperature high enough so that they will all burn brightly. This is an analogy for us as Christian disciples.

When all the initial excitement of finding Christ for the first time is gone, when all the fun stuff, like meals and parties together with our Christian friends are over, we are left with the work that each of us needs to do – work that is involved in the ongoing learning process of studying to be a better disciple of our Master, and work that is involved in serving others and reaching the lost. To do our work effectively, we need one another to help keep the fire going. We call that “fellowship.” That's why we come together for worship, study, and mission projects. When we depart, we continue to feel the warmth of the fellowship we shared together.

Every time you hear God's Word presented, you face these three questions. Whom do you say that Jesus is? Do you truly love Me? If you love Me, you will keep my commandments, Jesus said. and then you will be my disciple. Will you be His disciple?

I hope that something in today's service has caused you to feel the warm fire of God's love burning in your heart. If so, you may wish to respond in some tangible way. Perhaps you need to come forward and make your first public profession of faith in Christ. Perhaps you wish to join this fellowship. If you feel the urge to respond, please come forward as we sing our closing hymn.