

## **Greater Than Our Hearts**

*This is how we know that we belong to the truth and how we set our hearts at rest in his presence: If our hearts condemn us, we know that God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything. Dear friends, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have confidence before God... 1 John 3:19-22*

“God is greater than our hearts and he knows everything.” Are those the two most obvious statements you’ve ever heard, or what? He is better than us and knows better than we do. So far nothing new. You gotta know that John must’ve meant that he’s greater than our hearts in some specific way and knows everything about something in particular.

My heart has terribly limited peripheral vision. Without the help of the Spirit my heart either focuses on my flaws or my future, but not both in the same frame. I either feel shame about the past or wishful thinking about the future, but unaided, I can’t see how one could possibly lead to the other. Fortunately God can see more than one frame at a time. He’s greater than my heart and knows everything.

### **He knows my flaws and how to fix them**

There’s this specific matter of our hearts being restless with condemnation. When we’re in that condition evidently there are things that God knows that we don’t.

First of all, we can be sure that God already knew about the mistakes we’ve made. He knows everything better than our conscience and our heart. Knowing our missteps is a no-brainer for him. He knew those before we made them. He saw them before they happened in time. That’s easy. That’s a batting practice pitch, slow and over the plate.

But more than just the execution of our sins, he sees them coming. He sees what brings them about, watches each scenario unfold, knows our flaws and how our foe exploits them. On his stakeouts he observes the sly one lower the bait in front of us and watches us swim by it, and swim past again. He winces when we nibble at it and when we swallow it along with the hook. He’s “greater than your heart and knows everything.” He sees what we can’t – or won’t. When we are convicted, it’s because he gives us that gift. When we confess, we’re just saying what he’s been saying to us. He saw the whole thing, the whole process. There’s still no surprise there.

What else does God’s supervision take in? Plenty actually. Our screw-ups include more than a simple temptation. Even the Tempter knows this, in fact, that’s what makes him so good at his job. We all seem to carry around attitudes in our minds and wounds in our souls that make us even more vulnerable to take the bait. If you’ve got a bad ankle you’re more likely to trip on a treacherous narrow trail. Jesus knows these things before, during, and after each embarrassing fall. No doubt, way ahead of time, at a moment of intimacy, he whispered an offer of healing of the soul or issued a warning of that slippery place up ahead. But our pain wasn’t acute enough at the time to warrant our concern. He’s greater than our hearts and knows everything. He saw what was happening behind the scenes as the trap unfolded. He doesn’t always step in and prevent our fall, but be sure that he knew it ahead of time. He’s in control, but not controlling. But that’s still not nearly the extent of his greatness or his superior knowledge.

He knows better than we do not only about our flaws and failures, but about the fix, the only fix for them. He knows the extent and the full effect of how his Son stood in between our past and future, how he paid for our past and made a way into our future. If anyone gets it, God does. He planned the substitution, sent the Substitute, and is fully satisfied with what Jesus did in our place. The Father gets it because he orchestrated it. Jesus got it and said, “It is finished.” The Spirit understands it. He’s the one who opens our eyes to it. He knows everything.

When my heart is “at rest in his presence” it’s because I know a piece of what he knows. But, wait, there’s more that he knows and what makes him greater than my heart.

### **He knows my future possibilities and how to get me there**

He knows everything about how I performed in the past and why, and about the power of Jesus’ sacrifice to overcome my failures, and how he plans to convert them into a better future. The scope of his big picture vision is amazing. There’s no doubt that sin is a setback, a delay of God’s preferred vision for us. But since he’s been working with Plan B since the beginning, he who knows everything, knows how to make beautiful things out of broken pieces.

The great Fixer of failures knows that the Son’s sacrifice was more than enough to cancel the debt and overcome the deficit of our dark deeds and include them into his beautiful picture. He knows it, and in order to “put our hearts at rest in his presence” we have to be convinced of it too.

He sees the past with clarity, but more than that, he looks ahead to where he’s taking us from here. He has the big picture in his mind at all times, his grand plan for our beautification and our value to his glory. He knows everything; how each puzzle piece, even the most disfigured ones, fits together with other pieces in his grand plan and how they add up to an amazing future for his glory and our good.

He has infinite peripheral vision to see the past, present, and future without having to turn his head. He sees what our heart doesn’t see, where we’ve been, where are, and where we’re going. With our limited vision all we can see is our latest face plant. Humiliated once again, we assume that we’ll be benched indefinitely. But while he might call for a brief hospital stay to fix what we fractured in our fall, a round of rehab for our sake, his super vision points toward the future he sees in us.

He knows everything – our failures and our futures! He sees them both at the same time. The past and future frames may appear to us to be galaxies apart but he sees them connected by the cross that pays for our past and promotes us into his preferred future. Jesus’ blood does more than erase our past; it rewrites our future. He sees them both at once.

In some sovereign way he works our failures into our future. *“He works in all things for the good of those who love him and are called according to his purpose. For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son...”* He carefully chisels us into a resemblance of Jesus and – among other things – uses even our flaws and failures to do it.

### **A case study**

When he wrote, “God is greater than our hearts and knows everything,” I wouldn’t doubt if he had his good friend and teammate, Peter, in mind. I know that my favorite failure-become-champion is Peter – arrogant, immature, mouthy Peter. “They-might-blow-it-but-I’m-better-than-all-of-those-guys” Peter.

You know the narrative. *“I swear on a stack of Torah’s, I’m no friend of that man they call Jesus!”* Fast forward to the tomb angel, “Tell his disciples and Peter that Jesus will see you in Galilee.” I don’t think he was implying that Peter was off the team, but that he probably needed a special invitation because he thought he was. *“Be sure to tell Peter about the meeting. He might need a little extra encouragement to show up.”*

Jesus’ conversation on the shore with Peter is one of my very most favorite passages in all the Bible. John, of course, was there and knew what a perfect illustration this was of how much God knows, how much greater he is than our hearts, how our mistakes don’t have to disqualify us from playing on God’s team.

Before Peter's discipleship disaster Jesus saw it coming and gave him huge heads-up. It's probably the most famous ahead-of-time-warning in the Bible. He predicted it almost down to the hour – *"Before the rooster crows..."* He showed that he was greater than Peter's heart and that he knew everything. That, of course, is remarkable by itself, and should give us pause when the Spirit forewarns us about a pitfall. But the more dumbfounding part of the narrative to me is the therapeutic conversation they had on the beach shortly after Peter's debacle.

*Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?"*

*"Yes, Lord," he said, "you know that I love you."*

*Jesus said, "Feed my lambs."*

*Again Jesus said, "Simon son of John, do you love me?"*

*He answered, "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you."*

*Jesus said, "Take care of my sheep."*

*The third time he said to him, "Simon son of John, do you love me?"*

*Peter was hurt because Jesus asked him the third time, "Do you love me?" He said, "Lord, you know all things; you know that I love you."*

*Jesus said, "Feed my sheep. **John 21:15-17***

God is greater than our hearts and knows everything --- Jesus knew Peter better than Peter knew himself and knew him before Peter knew himself – before he knew anything for that matter. When Jesus first drafted him and his brother he knew Peter in particular would be a handful. No doubt, he knew from their first encounter that the impetuous fisherman with the personality disorder was not going to be his easiest rookie, but may well turn out to be, of the original twelve, the MVP of the team. That's why he put him on his first string in the first place along with John and James for special assignments. There would be lots of ups and downs, and many necessary teaching moments, but he took the risk of investing himself in this diamond (way) in the rough.

This scene on the beach was the second time Jesus washed Peter's feet (so to speak). The first time was just weeks before in the upper room after the Last Supper. Because he was greater than their hearts and knew everything, he washed the feet of all twelve from the dust of their denial before they even denied him. One of them, who will remain unnamed, did more than deny him, but ran out with his freshly washed feet and gave him up to the other team. Everyone was thinking it, but only Peter spoke up with his objection to having the Son of God wash his filthy feet. The Lord wouldn't be denied – not of this – *"You don't understand this now, but later you will."*

When "later" came, Peter's feet had never been so gross and his conscience along with them. Jesus set up a special one-on-one interview and asked him repeatedly, "Do you love me?"

It might sound like Jesus was rubbing his nose in his mistakes, but Peter was already quite painfully conscious of his flop. Instead of being better than the rest, with one exception, he'd done the worst.

Jesus is greater than our hearts and knows everything. He knew the answer; he always knows the answers to his own questions. He knew Peter didn't fully "agape" him and Peter knew it too. "I phileo you – "We have a lot in common and I guess I like you a lot, but the agape kind of love. Not really, no." Jesus' response shocks me every time I read it. Of all the things he could've said, this is the most unlikely.

*"Feed my sheep."*

*“OK. Wait. What?!”*

*“Feed my sheep, help my people know me and follow me where I am taking them. Be my voice to them. I want you to be a gentle and humble example to them for me.”*

I don't know if more was said that day than John recorded – probably was – but I'm thinking Peter was freaking out. *“You must have me confused with somebody else! I can't even stand up like a man for you, and you want to leave defenseless lambs, in my care? You can't be serious!”*

It went back and forth like that with some key variations in the terms that I won't make a point of now. The bottom-line is, Jesus is greater than our hearts and knows everything. He knows our mistakes before we make them. He knows the power his blood wields to put them behind us (as well as behind him). He knows what he can do with people who admit their flaws and commit them to him. And he knows, not only our potential, but also his potency that he places at our disposal to reach our destiny. From the beginning he knew Peter was more than a struggler, but was a man under the influence of omnipotent providence. So he hired him, the least likely candidate, for his most important position, shepherd of his sheep.

*“OK, so you don't agape me yet, at least not as much as you and I would both like. But because I see brighter days ahead and what you and I can do together, feed my sheep. We both know where you've been and where you are, but together let's look beyond all this. Will you go somewhere with me and do what I tell you to do?”*

*“Well,” Peter said, “okay, but wouldn't John be a better choice. He ran away along with the others but didn't disown you like I did. He's more of a natural at this. He gets that you love him and rested his head on your chest at the supper. I might blow it again. Have you thought about John?”*

*“I'll do what I choose to do with him and that's not to be our concern,” replied Jesus. “You don't see what I see yet, but if you follow me you will.”*

No one benefits from wallowing in failure. We're not defined by our failures, but humbled by them, instructed by them, reminded by them how much we need him. Mistakes, humbly confessed and repented of can be turned into sheep feed. This is only possible because God is greater than our hearts and knows everything.