

I Met Jesus: Peter Restored

John 21:15-19

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Steve DeWitt

I began last week by asking, "Anyone here ever fail the Lord?" I think we all would affirm we have. I then asked, "REALLY big failure? Colossal failure?" I would assume some deeply personal memory comes to the mind for each of us. Last week we saw the most infamous failure in the history of the church. Peter denying and betraying Jesus three times in his darkest hour. While Peter was denying Jesus to a girl, a man, and a group of men, in the courtyard, Jesus is remaining absolutely faithful while being beaten and interrogated. The big point last week was that this story is not here to inspire us to be like Jesus. It is here so that we can see that we are all like Peter. Peter represents human weakness, which makes the glory and beauty of Christ's obedience even to death all the more magnificent. The defining moment for Peter was the moment the rooster crowed. Matthew tells us *"And Peter remembered the saying of Jesus, 'Before the rooster crows, you will deny me three times.' And he went out and wept bitterly."* (Matthew 26:75)

And that is where we left it. What happened from here is well known. Jesus was falsely accused and beaten, brought to trial before Pilate and ultimately the Jewish crowd. Pilate sentenced him to death by crucifixion. He was flogged nearly to death. He carried his own cross to a hill outside of the city. He was nailed to the cross and hung between two thieves. As he hung there, God the Father made him guilty for the sins of the world thereby paying the ransom price for our sins. Around 3 o'clock in the afternoon, he cried out in a loud voice, "It is finished!" and he died. Seeing him die were many of the women who supported him in his ministry. Famously Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea were there to take care of his body. John was there along with Jesus' mother. Others were there as well.

Why do I go through the list of people near Jesus in his death? What is significant to us today is who wasn't there. His mother was there. Other supporters were there. At least one disciple was there. The Pharisees were there. The Romans were there. Who is the one person you would expect out of everyone to be there and who shockingly isn't? Peter, Jesus' right hand man; his inner circle guy. The one Jesus named the Rock. He denies Jesus in the courtyard and he deserts him at the cross.

We have to realize just how complete Peter's fall and failure is for our passage today to reach its full potential. Our passage is John 21:15ff. The narrative flows that Jesus was buried; raised to life on the third day; appeared to the disciples on multiple occasions. John records a series of appearances and this is one of them. Jesus and the disciples have a shoreline breakfast at the Sea of Galilee.

"When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, 'Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?'" (John 21:15)

Let's understand the setting. The disciples are seated around a charcoal fire. When was the last time they were seated together like this with Jesus? In the Upper Room. Even the charcoal fire is interesting as John identified the fire in the courtyard as a charcoal fire. Peter may have been feeling the déjà vu.

"Do you love me more than these?" (John 21:15)

Who are the “these”? Do you remember Peter’s fatal mistake in the Upper Room? *“Though they all fall away because of you, I will never fall away.”* (Matthew 26:33) Peter prior to the courtyard experience was eager not only to profess his devotion to Jesus, but to compare it to the devotion of others. His pride caused him to underestimate their devotion and overestimate his own. *“Do you love me more than the other disciples’ love me?”* What Jesus is doing is giving Peter an opportunity to either once again be Peter the Proud or to show that he had changed.

[Peter] said to him, “Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.” [Jesus] said to him, “Feed my lambs.” (John 21:15)

What do you notice about Peter’s response? Does he the answer the question? Yes and no. Jesus asks him to compare his devotion with the others. Old Peter would have been happy to do so and give himself an A+ and the others a C-. But this is a different Simon Peter than the previous 20 chapters of John. What happened? Failure happened. That failure has done its good work in Peter and he is now a different man. Brokenness happened.

“Feed my lambs.” Let’s identify the lambs or the sheep. Who are they? In John 10 and many other places, Jesus uses “sheep” language to describe his people. *“I know my sheep and my sheep know me.”* (John 10:14, NIV) If lambs or sheep are God’s people, what is Jesus saying with *“Feed my lambs?”* Who does the feeding? Shepherds. The Greek word for shepherds is what we get the word “pastor” from. To be a shepherd is to be a spiritual leader of God’s people. When you say Pastor Gary, you are really saying, Shepherd Gary. Leader of Sheep, Gary. To shepherd is to lead and these words must have meant so much to Peter because Jesus is publicly reinstating Peter as leader and shepherd over his people.

“He said to him 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, “Tend 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 everything; you know that I love you.” Jesus said to him, “Feed my sheep.” (John 21:16-17)

There’s quite a bit of debate about the slight differences in what Jesus asks. The Greek words for love are used interchangeably here. *Feed my sheep. Tend my sheep. Feed my sheep.* I think the main point gets muddled in all this and the nuances are very slight, if at all.

Jesus repeats his question AND his answer three times in front of Peter and the other disciples. Why do you suppose he did that? Let’s go back to the courtyard. Who asked Peter if he was a disciple of Jesus? The servant girl at the door, the men around the fire, and the relative of the high priest’s servant. Three times he was asked. Three times he failed. Was this known by the other disciples? I have to believe it was.

Would one reinstatement from the Lord be enough? Certainly. Did Jesus need to hear it three times? No. Why did he repeat, *“You are my Leader. You are my Leader. You are my Leader?”* Three denials. Three reinstatements. Jesus did this for Peter. Peter is fully forgiven and fully reinstated as a spiritual Shepherd and Leader.

There has never been, nor will there ever be in all of human history, a greater personal failure against Jesus AND a greater complete restoration than Simon Peter.

How do we feel on the other side of the failure, or the betrayal, or the sin?

- Can God really forgive me?
- Will it ever be the same again?
- Can my conscience ever be clean again?
- In God's eyes, am I a second-class citizen because of what I have done?

Peter's story has to be utterly hope-giving to us as his failure was greater than ours can ever be. Yet even with this failure, he is not only reinstated, but fully so to eventual apostleship, to preaching the first sermon on Pentecost, to introducing the gospel to the Gentile world, and to the authorship of some of the Scriptures you hold in your hand today.

"The fact that Peter was clearly forgiven by Jesus and given new responsibilities, amounting to apostleship, despite his total denial of his Lord, can give genuine hope to Christians today who feel that they have denied Jesus and that this is unforgiveable. He calls only for our repentance and our love."¹

God can't use me. I've done this or that. God's done with me. I've failed him so badly. How does your failure compare to Peter's? It certainly can't be worse, can it? Can Jesus restore someone like you? If he can restore Peter, then he can restore you.

How did this happen with Peter? Is it automatic? "I fail. Jesus forgives. Now I'm an Apostle?" No. In fact, some of you right now may be thinking, wasn't Judas' betrayal worse? In a way yes and in a way no. Was Judas forgiven and restored? No.

Peter and Judas Compared

Peter	Judas
Disciple	Disciple
Betrayed Jesus	Betrayed Jesus
Deep conviction	Deep conviction

Returned to Christ	Ran away
Restored love	Despair
Followed Jesus again	Death as escape
Heaven	Hell

By God's grace, it is not our failures that define us, it is our response to them. This means **with God, failure is never final.**² Even great failure, colossal failure, does not have to be the final word for us. It clearly was for Judas. However, it doesn't have to be for us. This is God's grace, but it requires that we humble ourselves before God. There is no record of Peter confessing his sin in this, but the passage drips with contrition as Peter refuses to repeat his prior failure and to see himself as better than others. That's repentance. So with our failures we have the option to either be a Peter or a Judas. Which are you?

I imagine as I talk about this, there are many secret failures that are coming to mind and conscience in the room. Failures that you have buried and hoped would never again see the light of day. If they have been confessed and repented of, then praise God. However, the

¹Carson, D. A.: *New Bible Commentary: 21st Century Edition*. 4th ed. Leicester, England; Downers Grove, Ill., USA: Intervarsity Press, 1994, Jn. 21:15

² Milne, Bruce: *The Message of John*. Leicester, England; Downers Grove, Ill., USA: Intervarsity Press, 1993, p. 317.

question is not a matter of remorse but of repentance. Judas was remorseful but refused to return to Christ. There was no affirmation of genuine love from him. Peter returned to Christ. He affirmed his love. He refused to repeat his failure. This is why I believe Jesus didn't say, "Did you betray me?" Or "Let's talk about the courtyard." He asks, "Do you love me more than these?"

The Key Issue in True Restoration is Christ as First in our Hearts

Jesus' question is as powerful today as it was then. "Do you love me?" We can fail at many things, but we cannot fail to return to Christ as our first love. If you get that right, then you get everything else with it. **This is when I know my repentance is complete, when my relationship with Jesus is more important than _____ to me.**

For Peter it was his sense of standing in the group. Yours is likely something different. Here is the battle when I go through failure, do I love him first and most? Do I love him more than my lust? More than my gossip? More than my reputation which allows me to confess and make things right with others? More than my money which allows me to make restitution for the wrong I've done? More than my need to be right, which allows me to humble myself to even my enemies?

Confess the sin. Ask God to forgive. Then seek to restore Christ as the priority love of your life. Do that and everything else repentance looks like will flow like dominoes.

Here is a final comment on Peter. From the shore of Galilee, he would live up to his name Peter the Rock. So much so that while not clearly attested, fragments of church history tell us that Peter was executed in Rome by the Emperor Nero. He watched his wife be executed first and exhorted her as she died to "remember the Lord." Then when his moment came, he begged to be crucified upside down saying he was unworthy to die as his Lord had. Peter had come a long way from the Upper Room boast and the courtyard failure. He was restored at the shore and proved that his love for Christ was genuine – dying as a martyr, upside down, on a Roman cross. Simon became Peter, the Rock.

*because we are all
betrayers, taking
silver and eating
body and blood and asking
(guilty) it is I and hearing
him say yes
it would be simple for us all
to rush out
and hang ourselves*

*but if we find grace
to cry and wait
after the voice of morning
has crowed in our ears
clearly enough
to break our hearts
he will be there
to ask us each again
do you love me?*

Judas, Peter by Luci Shaw

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