

The Failure And Restoration Of Peter

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[0 : 00] We're in John chapter 21, the last chapter of the Gospel of John. It's probably one of my favourite chapters.

And this story occurs after Jesus has been raised from the dead. I'm going to refer to a couple of things that took place on that resurrection Sunday, the first Sunday when Jesus rose there in Luke's Gospel.

But this story from John took place what seems to be a couple of weeks or so after the resurrection. The disciples had already met Jesus, but it seems that Jesus was not physically with them all the time during this period before he ascended to heaven, but he would come and go a little.

So we'll read from verse, we'll read the whole chapter of John 21. After this, Jesus revealed himself again to the disciples by the sea of Tiberius, and he revealed himself in this way.

Simon Peter, Thomas, called the twin, Nathaniel of Cana and Galilee, the sons of Zebedee and two others of his disciples were together. Simon Peter said to them, I'm going fishing.

[1 : 07] They said to him, we will go with you. They went out and got into the boat, but that night they caught nothing. Just as day was breaking, Jesus stood on the shore.

Yet the disciples did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to them, children, do you have any fish? They answered him, no, he said to them, cast the net on the right side of the boat and you will find some.

So they cast it and now they were not able to haul it in because of the quantity of fish. That disciple whom Jesus loved therefore said to Peter, it is the Lord.

When Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he put on his outer garment for he was stripped for work and threw himself into the sea. The other disciples came in the boat dragging the net full of fish for they were not far from the land but about 100 yards off.

When they got out on land they saw a charcoal fire in place with fish laid out in it and bread. Jesus said to them, bring some of the fish you have just caught.

[2 : 12] So Simon Peter went aboard and hauled the net ashore full of large fish, 153 of them. And although there were so many, the net was not torn. Jesus said to them, come and have breakfast.

Now none of the disciples dared ask him, who are you? They knew it was the Lord. Jesus came and took the bread and gave it to them and so were the fish. This was now the third time that Jesus was revealed to the disciples after he was raised from the dead.

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, feed my lambs. 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?

[3 : 20] And he said to him, Lord, you know everything, you know that I love you. Jesus said to him, feed my sheep. Truly, truly I say to you, when you were young you used to dress yourself in a walk wherever you wanted, but when you're old you will stretch out your hands and another will dress you and carry you where you do not want to go.

This he said to show by what kind of death he was to glorify God. And after saying this he said to him, follow me. Peter turned and saw the disciple whom Jesus loved following them, the one who had been reclining at table close to him and had said, Lord, who is it that is going to betray you? When Peter saw him he said to Jesus, Lord, what about this man? Jesus said to him, if it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you?

Follow me. So the saying spread abroad among the brothers that this disciple was not to die. Yet Jesus did not say to him that he was not to die, but if it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you?

This is the disciple who is bearing witness about these things and who has written these things and we know that his testimony is true. Now there are also many other things that Jesus did, but every one of them to be written, I suppose, that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written.

[4 : 45] Again pray that God would bless that reading to us. Well, as I said tonight we are taking a look at Peter and how he failed Jesus and also later on how Jesus restored him.

And an important question that I think many of us struggle with is what happens if I mess up as a Christian? If you are not a Christian perhaps this is your reason for wavering.

What if I blow it? I spoke to someone recently who was worried about this and seemed to be hanging back from commitment to Jesus as a result. If you are a Christian we can be living in fear that we may blow it, bringing disgrace on ourselves, on our church, on our Lord.

This fear can paralyze us from doing anything at all for Jesus in case we fail. So we all worry about this to some extent and at one level it is a good worry to be concerned about how our behaviour reflects on our Saviour Jesus.

But we are asking the wrong question. It is not about what happens if I mess up but what happens when I mess up. Because the reality is that whether anyone else is aware or not that we have fallen short that we all fail.

[5 : 54] And that is not a good thing. It is not okay. Just because we all fail does not mean that it does not matter or that we should just give up. The question is what should we do about it and more importantly what does Jesus do about it?

As we look at Peter's story tonight I want to approach it in two sections with each section having three subsections. Happily all these begin with R. When at the end we will have a final R just to wrap things up as we conclude.

So there is plenty to get through. It is certainly not as symmetrical as it sounds and we will not be covering every aspect of this amazing true story. But with God's help, your patience and a decent pace from me I hope will be beneficial for us all.

So let's get going. The first point is what went wrong? And the first R within that is there was a reckless declaration. So taking a step back from this things have been going well for Peter.

Maybe he almost felt invincible. Earlier on in Jesus' ministry Peter had been the first disciple to identify Jesus as the Christ God's chosen one sent from heaven by God.

[7 : 01] And he had then pronounced as we read earlier that even if everybody else desired Jesus he never would. In fact he would even die with Jesus. That's a huge dedication.

But this was reckless. He was boasting thinking he could stand in his own strength. Declaration of devotion and dedication are not wrong.

We've already sung tonight from Psalm 18 which starts with I love you Lord. But what follows is a statement of full dependence on him where he says you are my strength.

And by verse 29 of the Psalm the Psalmist is exclaiming that he can leap over any wall but only with God's help. So even in our declarations we see that dependence on God for help is essential.

We are unable to do anything on our own. Having made this declaration that even if everybody else desired Jesus he was prepared to die with him. Peter was stepping away from dependence on Jesus thinking he could stand.

[8 : 01] In 1 Corinthians 10 there's lots of examples from the Old Testament on warnings. And these conclude with a line. Therefore let anyone who thinks he stands take heed lest he falls.

So there's a warning about reckless declarations. Our second point, our second R is reputation. So we see that Peter was more concerned about his reputation amongst the crowd than being known as a follower of Jesus.

Peter was on his own in an evil place warming himself by the fire with the very people who had arrested Jesus. And that reminds us of Psalm number one where we read that he says, blessed is the man who does not walk in the council of the wicked nor stands in the way of sinners nor sits in the seat of mockers.

Peter is there sitting warming himself by the fire trying to fit in, being one of the crowd, seeking to find warmth and acceptance in the same place that the world does.

I'm not sure that's even possible. But he wasn't fitting in and then he was overcompensating when the questions came in an effort to prove himself as one of them.

[9 : 14] He started denying that he even knew Jesus. Peter was all alone in an evil place and probably didn't realize when he walked in that he was going to be surrounded by such depths of evil.

But there he was and his strength evaporated when the pressure came because he was more concerned about his reputation and acceptance with the enemies of Jesus than his reputation and acceptance before Jesus himself.

He was more concerned about what people thought of him that night rather than what they thought of Jesus. And when the pressure came, clarity came for Peter. He was more interested in self-preservation, ultimately self-glory rather than God's glory was being sought.

And even though Jesus had warned him explicitly just a few hours before, he collapses. We read in Matthew and Mark's accounts that after the third question he was so vehement in his denial that he knew Jesus that he said he began to invoke a curse on himself and to swear, I do not know this man of whom you speak.

He was desperate, desperate to save his own skin rather than be known as a follower of Jesus. And that takes us to our third R which is regret.

[10 : 29] Peter turns, so Jesus turns and looks at Peter. We'll come back to that part in a moment, but when Jesus looked at Peter, Peter wept. He was broken, undone.

He capitulated under pressure and he knew it. Did he have the scenes from his previous apparent triumphs running through his head as that happened?

Was this the end of the story? It just says he went out and wept bitterly, hopeless and broken. Now we know that this changes, but it's important to see this point in time for what it looked like.

It feels like the end, it's very solemn and really sad. And before we move on to the second section, we want to think about a few things about what we can learn from for ourselves.

Because we have to be honest and see how easily we fit into this pattern that Peter fell into. We can have reckless declarations of devotion and love for Jesus without depending on him.

[11 : 28] We can rely on our own strength rather than on God. There are so many examples in the Bible of this sort of thing happening. For example, when David in the Old Testament counts his army, it's seen by God as a great wickedness because he was relying on his own perceived strength rather than God.

He would have given him the victories previously. For us, we can declare our love for God, but actually our real security is in our bank balance, or in our house, or car, or our looks, or our connections.

And then we become more concerned about our reputation before our friends and our family and our colleagues and before Jesus, and we're fearful of what others will think of us.

And this fear governs our actions more powerfully than our love for Jesus. The fear of rejection from others governs our actions more powerfully than our love for Jesus.

And as we fail, we encounter regret. And this regret can seem final. We are failures, hopeless. It's the end of the road. Have you ever felt like that, that there's no way back?

[12 : 32] You know, it's easy to be down on Peter, but he was in a tough place. And where have you and I failed in far easier places? In the office kitchen, or the building site, the school gate, or in an aisle in the co-op, or even in the church car park or at church coffee time?

Have we failed to say that we know Jesus, that we love him? Because the reality is the battle is raging just as hard for us, but through subtle situations.

The question is, do we see the battle in the undertones of what is often portrayed as harmless fun or entertainment? We all want to fit in and we all want to feel accepted.

But what compromises are we prepared to make in order to get there? What jokes are we laughing at? Are we drinking too much? Are we watching things that we shouldn't?

Are we spending money we don't have on things that we don't need? All these things can take us away from the Lord. They create distance, they can stop prayer, and they create the conditions for a collapse.

[13 : 38] I'm not trying to beat down on us here, I'm just trying to be realistic about how things often are in life. Facing up to these realities is an important step to lasting change in God's strength.

And then we have Jesus looking, and have you ever been aware of the Lord looking at you? Isaiah knew about this in chapter 6 of his book.

He writes that before God he says, woe is me, I am undone. And have you ever known that feeling, that sense of total exposure before God?

Yet in the sadness there's grace. It's like God walking in the garden when Adam and Eve were hiding. Even in the depths of our sin, He seeks us out.

But what do we do? In our regret and our shame, are we willing to be open and honest with Him? Peter went outside and wept.

[14:34] When did you and I last weep because of our sin? And that's a big question. We're so used to putting on a show, to being fine, to covering things over and moving on to whatever's next.

But when was the last time I was truly honest about who I am before God? There's the greatest freedom and ultimately the greatest joy in that pathway.

Second section is what did Jesus do? So we've looked at what went wrong and we're looking at what did Jesus do? The first R within that is reaching out. And we've already seen that Peter was in a very dark place and in a very evil time.

And Jesus was there too. He was surrounded by dark forces, all determined to destroy him. But he was steadfast and strong. And he also sought to uphold Peter, who had fallen.

It's amazing that Jesus reached out for Peter as soon as he fell. As soon as he fell, he looked at him. What did that look hold? Sadness? Knowledge?

[15:38] Kindness? We can speculate, but the very fact that Jesus looked at Peter rather than away from him, that's the very starting point to restoration.

Jesus was about to go to the cross to die in unsearchable agony in order to pay the penalty for sin, including Peter's sin. And so the kind and gracious love of Jesus was in full action, even in this dark moment of trial.

Peter had said that he didn't know Jesus, but Jesus was looking out for him. He knows his own. And then after the resurrection, there are some really interesting, if understated, comments regarding Jesus reaching out for Peter, specifically and privately.

Both Luke 24 and 1 Corinthians 15 point to Peter having met Jesus separately from the other friends and disciples on that first resurrection Sunday. The evidence for this is particularly in Luke 24, verse 34, which is after the two on the road to Emmaus returned to Jerusalem, and they're saying that they've seen Jesus and the disciples respond by saying, yes, and he's appeared to Simon.

And it would seem that this happens after verse 12 of that chapter where we read that Peter was at the empty tomb and he went off marvelling to himself about the empty tomb. And it seems in that gap in the day that Jesus met Peter.

[17:00] We don't know much of what happened, but we don't know anything what happened there, but there does seem to be a private meeting. And it's an amazing thought to think that on that first resurrection Sunday, Jesus was out and about gathering in his people, bringing hope in place of despair.

And there's surely a lesson here for how we spend our own Sundays. So there's some conjecture here, but the Bible does give us grounds to believe that this meeting took place and the very nature of Jesus gives us confidence in reflecting on it.

And it can be a picture, it can be a picture of the agony of Peter, the intensity of confronting his failure with the one against whom he had failed. The failure had happened just a few hours earlier on the earlier hours of Friday morning.

And Peter would then have heard about the horrific treatment of Jesus, his crucifixion, his death and his burial. The devastation must have felt complete and irreversible.

But the grace of Jesus triumphs over all. And it seems that in that private meeting, Peter was cared for by Jesus in the way prophesied by Isaiah in chapter 42 verse 3 where it says, A bruised reed, he will not break, and a faintly burning wick, he will not quench.

[18:19] We all must have private meetings with Jesus, times of open and honest prayer. And although the church should be a place of great community and encouragement, each of us must have our own individual relationship with the Lord.

And reading his word, meditating on it and praying to him honestly, that's the daily way of daily conversation with him is found and maintained.

And that's simple way, reading his word, meditating on it and praying to him. This must be foundational to our lives. It's difficult to establish, easy to lose, no doubt, but in this is true life. At the Kaiser Convention this summer, one of the speakers said that there is more kindness in Jesus than there is darkness in me. There is more grace in Jesus than there is sin in me. Do you believe that? You might nod your head, but do we really take on board the immensity of the kindness, the grace and the love of Jesus? It's on full display in his restoration of Peter.

[19 : 26] Peter had said, I don't know him, but Jesus comes and says, I know you. Peter hadn't even attempted to say that he loved Jesus. He denied that he even knew him.

Jesus not only knows us, but he loves us. And this is amazing. He sees the depths of my heart and he still loves me. And he demonstrates that to the fullest extent on the cross.

We don't need to wonder if his love is real or not. It's all been done and that love was paying the price, paying the penalty for our sin, even the sin of denying that we know him.

What love? There's nothing better. Our second act is restoration. This was in public because the private meeting wasn't sufficient.

Because Peter's sin was public, there needed to be public repentance and restoration. And we read of this in John 21, when Jesus and the disciples had had their breakfast on the beach.

[20 : 23] And this story reminds me a little of when I was young. And on the odd occasion, when I would be getting told off by my mum for something or other, and the point of the day between school ending and dinner time.

Mum would tell me off and that was bad enough. And then my dad would get home from work and we'd have to go through the whole ordeal all over again. As mum told dad in front of me whatever the misdemeanor was.

That was awkward, sometimes painful in more ways than one. But in reflecting on it, I could see it was necessary for them to set things right and for them both to be on the same page.

So as Peter responds to Jesus' questions, it's almost like he's saying, haven't we dealt with this already? But this was very awkward for Peter. But this needed to be dealt with publicly.

The other disciples must have known what had happened and they needed to see Jesus restore Peter as painful as that would have been. Jesus deals with Peter throughout like a skilled surgeon, dealing with the problem, painful but necessary, but always full of grace and care and love.

[21 : 31] Here they were beside another fire on a fresh morning rather than a dark night, surrounded by friends rather than by enemies. And Jesus sets things right.

The charcoal fire perhaps reminded Peter of where it had all gone so wrong. The miraculous catch of fish perhaps took him right back to the beginning when he had first met Jesus.

We read about that in the beginning of Luke 5. And this is what Jesus can do. As a song says, back to the start, where you found me, I give you my heart again.

Take everything. I am all I can bring. I am coming home again. And to be safe with Jesus, that is the only true, forever home that exists.

Well, what do they talk about that breakfast? I wonder if there was some long silences of contentment and also awkwardness. It probably got particularly awkward as Jesus started his questions with Peter.

[22 : 31] You can sort of imagine the other disciples quietly putting down their plates or whatever and staring intently at the ground while they listened to what was going on. When we hear this word repentance, well, what does it mean?

It's not just about feeling sorry or having regret, although sorrow is involved for sure. But having admitted the wrong, full repentance is when we turn away from the wrong, that sin and go in the other direction.

It's an about turn. It's about an understanding of something of the wrong that we've done, seeing the hurt that it's caused and resolving with God's help to turn away.

Repentance is a wonderful gift from God. Repentance is a fundamental turning away from sin, 180 degrees. Seeing it for what it is, the horror Jesus had to endure to deal with it and resolving with God's help and strength to live life in a new direction, seeking to obey and please God in every aspect of life.

It's a change of mindset, it's a change of heart, affections, it's a whole life change. So Jesus asks Peter if he loves him.

[23 : 42] He's already shown his love for Peter. He died in order to make it possible for Peter to be forgiven. But does Peter love Jesus?

He has made great declarations in the past. What will he say now? After all that's happened. Jesus asks Peter if he loves him more than these, more than what?

I've heard different things on this but it would seem to me that that's a reference to Peter having said before effectively that he loved Jesus more than all the other disciples.

Even if all fall away, I will never. So what has Peter got now? We can imagine his tone of voice as he humbly answers that first time. Yes, Lord.

You know that I love you. Quiet and understated. But genuine, true, love for his Savior Jesus.

Another way of looking at the more than these comment would be that Jesus could have been asking do you love me more than these fish, i.e. your old way of life without me?

[24 : 44] Would Peter prefer to go back to his old way of life without Jesus? And this leads us to ask ourselves, do I love Jesus more than anything? Is he first place or is he just somewhere in the mix?

Is that good enough for the one who has loved me and given himself for me? He demands and deserves first place. There's so much more that could be said on this, the use of Peter's original name, Simon, the fact that Jesus already had fish cooking before the disciples brought theirs.

And I'd encourage you to watch the week three evening talks from the Keswick Convention which covered John 20 and 21, particularly the last two which cover this section.

The third question from Jesus, Peter is broken again. The third time, mirroring Peter's third denial. But this was the way to true forgiveness, repentance and restoration.

To face up to exactly what he had done wrong and to know the kindness of Jesus. It's not about sweeping stone under the carpet, it's about owning it, taking responsibility.

[25 : 52] And then knowing the forgiveness and joy of a cleansed heart to move on. And we need to do this with our sin, to be honest before the Lord. Know his forgiveness and then move forward in his grace and strength.

But ultimately it comes down to just one question for each of us tonight. Do we love Jesus? He personalizes it, he looks at me and he asks me, do you love me?

And in the end it's the only question that ever really matters in all of life and death. Do you love Jesus? He's shown his love to the greatest possible extent.

How could we just ignore that and get on with our lives as if other things were more important? It shouldn't be like that. As Christians we often talk about serving Jesus.

He serves, but he serves us first just as he loves us first. He served the disciples breakfast that morning and he previously served them by washing their feet.

[26 : 53] But ultimately he has served every believer when he humbled himself in the very lowest place. Humiliated, beaten, despised and rejected, forsaken and crucified, condemned for my sin when he had no sin.

Bearing the weight of punishment due to Peter, due to me and you. Every person who has ever lived and whoever will live who will trust in him. Bearing it all in order to save his own.

As Max Lucado once said, Jesus would rather go to hell for you than be in heaven without you. Our third R in this second section is role.

And if you were reading this chapter for the first time, knowing it was the last chapter of this amazing book that John had written, you would likely expect that he would end with a great theological statement of eternal truth much in the way that he began chapter one.

But here we are for six verses from the end of this book and we have the reality of daily life as Peter trips up again. He's been restored and he's been given a role by Jesus to feed his sheep, appointing him to be a leader in the church that would soon be formed, teaching new Christians how to follow Jesus.

[28 : 09] This is amazing that after such a disastrous fall, Peter has not only been forgiven, but he's been given a role. Except Peter looks around and he sees John and he asks Jesus, Lord, what about him?

It's almost ridiculous and yet he's so normal. We can be so easily distracted by what others are doing that we don't see the role that God has given us. Our roles are God given.

Ephesians 2, 10 says that God has prepared good works for us to do in advance. We just have to ask him for eyes to see and hearts to care.

What might that be for you? Well, you look at your home or your family, your neighbors and your colleagues, your church family. There's plenty already to think about, I'm sure.

Perhaps God is calling you to another area. So don't be so set in your ways or your comforts that you're unwilling to move if you sense his prompting. But Jesus has given each of us a role and he asks us simply to follow him, to look at him, not being distracted by others.

[29 : 13] Effectively telling Peter and us to mind our own business and follow him. Our eyes should be focused on Jesus only and seeking to please him in all that we say and do and think.

And it's from that place of safety and security that we're able to serve, not on our own feeble strength, but by knowing his strength. So everything is for him, by him, it's all for him.

And his grace that saves us initially is the same grace that sustains us and keeps us. Do you think that if Jesus died for you in order to bring you into his family that he's somehow going to leave you now to muddle through life as best you can?

That's not how he works. He continues the work that he started all the way to the end. As always, he is the hero of the story, not Peter or you or me.

And our final R just to try and conclude and bring everything together. Our final R is redemption. Because how is all this possible? How is Jesus able to forgive and restore Peter?

[30 : 19] How can he forgive and restore us? It cannot be a case of Jesus just saying, don't worry about it, Peter. Because that won't do, there needs to be a reconciliation, a writing of the wrong.

And this is the case for every sin. And as with every sin, the only way that it can truly be dealt with is if we go through the cross. So just as in reading the story narrative from the fireside denial to the shoreside restoration, we pass through the story of the death of Jesus on the cross and his resurrection.

So for each of us, the only way we can receive forgiveness and restoration for our failures is through the cross. At the cross, Jesus redeemed us. He paid the price for our sin, even the very direct failings against him.

Peter failed in the heat of the moment by the fire in the courtyard. Jesus triumphed in the heat of the moment through the fire of hell. So our confidence and our hope are in him alone.

And I don't know where you're at this evening. Perhaps in the midst of failure just now and thinking you've gone too far from the grace of God, thinking you're past the point of no return, you may be feeling that all of this I'm talking about is fine in theory, but if you knew what I'd done or said or thought, then you'd know I'm a hopeless case.

[31 : 41] If that's you, please let this story of Peter encourage you as we look at and consider Jesus graciously and gently, yet relentlessly restoring him.

And that giving him a hope and a future, and so there's a hope and a future for you too. If you'd like to talk to someone, I'm happy to help or ask Thomas or an elder here or somebody else that you trust.

We'll all do the same thing. We'll point you to Jesus, always to Jesus. So what do we do when we mess up? Whether it's for the first time tonight as you finally confess your sin and come to Jesus and ask him to save you, or perhaps for the thousandth time, coming to him after yet another stumble.

We come to Jesus, always to Jesus. I mean, Marvel, that he should love us so much that he would die for us, that we would see the depth of our sin, the hopelessness of our situation without him, and the wonder and greatness of his love for poor, wretched sinners and entrust ourselves to his love and care, knowing that he will hold us fast.

The reality is that although we must come to Jesus, we must recognize that he's already come to us. And it's in this fact that we have our confidence. He left heaven to come into this world to seek and to save the lost.

[33 : 02] And just as he prayed for Peter before he messed up, so he prayed for us too as we can read in John 17. And now he's in heaven and he continues to pray for us.

In Romans 8.34 we read that he is at the right hand of God, interceding for us. And lastly, what did Peter have to say about all this?

The word, the end of his life, he wrote a couple of letters that are in the Bible and read in his first letter, chapter 5, some lessons from his experiences and we'll finish with his advice just now.

Humble yourselves therefore under God's mighty hand that he may lift you up in due time. Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you.

Be alert and of sober mind. Your enemy, the devil, prowls around like a roaring lion, looking for someone to devour.

[34 : 01] Resist him standing firm in the faith because you know that the family of believers throughout the world is undergoing the same kind of sufferings. And the God of all grace who called you to his eternal glory in Christ after you have suffered a little while will himself restore you and make you strong and firm and steadfast.

To him be the power for ever and ever. Amen.