

HOPE AFTER FAILURE

John 21:15-17

Christian author Robert Wise had a minister friend who used to call him on the phone on Monday mornings. Robert would answer and the minister would say, “Hello, this is God. I have a gift for you today. I want to give you the gift of failing. Today you do not have to succeed. I grant you that.”

Then he would hang up. Robert said, “The first time I couldn’t believe it. But it really is the gospel. God’s love means it’s even OK to fail. You don’t have to be the greatest thing in the world. You can just be you.” (Robert Wise, *Your Churning Place*)

Every one of us at some time or other feels like failures. We focus so much on our failures we feel like God doesn’t love us anymore—or that we can no longer serve Him.

C.S. Lewis, in *The Screwtape Letters*, vividly describes Satan’s strategy: He gets Christians to become preoccupied with their failures; from then on, the battle is won. Think about Peter.

Peter led the early church. Through his preaching 3000 people were saved in one day. He made a lame man walk and raised a woman from the dead. It was said that he was turning Jerusalem upside down with his preaching.

Yet, just a short time before, he was an utter failure—three times he denied knowing Jesus. What do you think was uppermost in his mind after that night of denials?

More importantly, how was God able to use in such a mighty way a man who had so greatly failed?

The secret may lie in the special, final interview Peter had with Jesus in John 21. But first, let’s see how God began to turn Peter’s life around in the chaotic time following the crucifixion, especially right after the resurrection.

1. Peter saw changed lives.

Peter saw firsthand how God changed the lives of others. Think of John. After the crucifixion Peter and John ran to the tomb to see if Jesus' body had been stolen.

Mary Magdalene had been there first and seeing the great stone rolled away, she assumed someone had stolen the body.

At the tomb Peter went inside and examined the evidence. The linen wrappings were in place, the face-cloth folded. Obviously the body had not been stolen.

When John entered and saw the wrappings he immediately believed that Jesus had been raised from the dead (20:8). He didn't understand everything about the resurrection, but the evidence was enough. Peter saw the faith of John.

Or consider Mary Magdalene. After Peter and John left the tomb, Mary Magdalene stood outside crying. She thought the body was stolen. When she looked back into the tomb she saw two angels. They asked why she was crying.

She said, "They have taken my Lord away, and I don't know where they have put him." (20:13). Mary had many doubts. She didn't understand. As she turned to leave she saw someone she thought was the gardener.

She didn't recognize Jesus through her tears, so she asked Him where the body was. Jesus said, "Mary." Just Him simply saying her name was enough for her to recognize Him.

She ran and told the disciples, "I have seen the Lord." Peter took note of her faith.

Peter also noted the other disciples. On the evening of the resurrection, as the disciples huddled together out of fear of the Jewish leaders, Jesus appeared with words of peace (20:19).

In that very emotional setting He showed them his hands and side. It was their Lord, and they rejoiced that He was with them.

He instructed them to go out with the message of Jesus to the ends of the earth. He promised them the Holy Spirit. He told them to communicate what God had done for them through Jesus.

From that moment on the disciples were transformed and energized. Peter saw the change.

Peter also saw what happened to Thomas. Thomas wasn't present when Jesus appeared to the huddled, hidden disciples. After being told of Christ's appearance, he demanded to see for himself the imprint of the nails and spear.

A week later when Jesus again appeared to the disciples Thomas was there. Jesus told him "See my hands, touch my side" (20:27). And Thomas replied, "My Lord and my God." He was moved from disbelief to belief. That must have greatly impacted Peter.

2. Peter encountered the risen Lord.

The next time Jesus appeared to his disciples, they were fishing. At Peter's instigation, seven of them had gathered at the Sea of Galilee. (John 21:1-14).

We have no insight into why Peter decided to go back to his old trade. Maybe he didn't know what else to do. He felt he had failed so miserably that Jesus was done with him. Whatever, it was an exercise in futility.

They fished all night, but caught nothing (21:3). They had a boat, ability, experience, and enthusiasm. They thought they were completely equipped and knew where and how to catch fish.

Now fishing can be a useful trade, but it was not the priority for men commissioned to serve Christ around the world. Jesus had told them, "apart from me you can do nothing."

So now Jesus stepped into the picture. He told them to throw their net over the right side of the boat (v. 6). They caught so many fish they couldn't haul in the net. Following Christ's commands makes the difference in every circumstance of life.

It was then John recognized Jesus. "It's the Lord!" he said. When Peter heard this, he dived into the water and swam ashore. There Jesus had prepared some fish and bread to eat.

"Come and have breakfast," Jesus said (v. 12). Just like when He fed the 5000, Jesus took the bread and fish and gave it to them (v. 13). Peter and the disciples again saw firsthand that Jesus was interested in meeting the ordinary needs of life.

Then Jesus began his conversation with Peter. John 21:15-17(NIV)

15When they had finished eating, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon son of John, do you truly love me more than these?" "Yes, Lord," he said, "you know that I love you." Jesus said, "Feed my lambs."

16Again Jesus said, "Simon son of John, do you truly love me?" He answered, "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you." Jesus said, "Take care of my sheep."

17The 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.”

Remember, only a short time before this dramatic encounter with the risen Lord, Peter had boldly announced that he would give his life for Jesus.

Jesus responded by informing Peter that he would actually deny Him three times that same night. Later that evening, Jesus was arrested.

While He stood trial before the chief priest, Peter hid outside in the courtyard. Three times he was recognized as one of Jesus’ followers, and three times Peter denied knowing Jesus.

The scriptures tell us that when Peter realized what he had done he “wept bitterly.” Imagine then, Peter’s emotions during this encounter with Jesus by the Sea of Tiberias.

On the one hand he was overjoyed to see the risen Lord. On the other hand he was ashamed and embarrassed about his desertion of Jesus in the hour of His greatest need.

Now, take a closer look at this encounter. After breakfast Jesus asked Peter if he loved Him “more than these?” “Peter, do you love me more than your boat, your nets and your fishing?

“Are you prepared to give them up, give up your career, a steady job, and reasonable comfort, in order to give yourself wholly to Me and My work?”

Or, “Peter, do you love me more than the other disciples love me?” Remember, Peter had claimed, “Even if all fall away...I never will” (Matt. 26:33).

He thought that he alone could and would be true and yet, how his courage had failed. We’ve all been there haven’t we!

Peter answered, “Yes, Lord.” Jesus told him, “Feed My lambs.”

Again Jesus asked Peter if He truly loved Him. When Peter said, “Yes, Lord,” Jesus said to him, “Take care of my sheep.” Jesus then asked a third time, “Do you love me?”

Three times Peter denied Christ, and three times he was affirmed by Christ. And Peter answered for the third time, “Lord, you know all things. You know that I love you.” Jesus responded, “Feed My sheep.”

3. Peter learned important lessons.

This was a very brief exchange—a quick breakfast, three quick questions. But more than anything else, this brief encounter was forever imprinted upon Peter’s mind—Christ still loved him, and he could still serve Christ.

Remember, Peter had been touched already by the changes he saw in the other disciple’s lives, and now, Jesus’ questions cut right to the quick of his three denials.

(1) He learned about forgiveness.

Jesus had made all those appearances to the disciples. They got excited and empowered. But Peter felt the greatest sense of alienation. He knew what a sinner he was.

Three times Jesus told him to feed His lambs and care for His sheep. To Peter’s way of thinking he thought, “I’ve blown it. He won’t have anything to do with me.”

Yet, with Peter’s final response, “You know that I love you,” Christ had gotten a commitment from Peter and assured the other disciples of the bond between Himself and Peter.

In this brief exchange, Jesus restored Peter to a position of leadership in the ongoing ministry of the Gospel. Peter was restored.

(2) He learned the power of affirming love.

The important lesson here is that as Peter affirmed his love for Jesus, he learned that Jesus had never stopped loving him, and that through that love, Jesus would give him power for service.

Scholars have enjoyed debating why Jesus used the word *agape*, an act of the will, and Peter’s word *phileo*, emotional love, for the final question.

The answer is simple, loving Christ and serving him requires both an act of our will and an emotional response.

(3) He learned the scope of his ministry.

Jesus told Peter to feed His lambs and take care of His sheep. In other words, be a shepherd to the Church. A shepherd’s job is to feed, lead and protect the sheep in his care.

Both words, lamb and sheep, show the all-encompassing ministry that a person has in serving the Lord. God loves every person, not just our kind.

A true servant is to minister to all people—young and old, male and female, no matter the color of skin or nationality or ethnicity. Peter had failed Jesus miserably. He was fully and publicly restored by Jesus so that he could serve Jesus.

Application:

There are times when we have also failed our Savior. Jesus does not stop loving us. But He wants us to return to Him in love, as did Peter. Peter had to recognize his mistake, affirm his love for Jesus, and be restored. Such restoration is true for all who declare their love for God.