

Jesus Encounters a Failure

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[0 : 00] The reading this morning is from John chapter 21, beginning at verse 15. 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? 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 and walk wherever you wanted. But when you are old, you will stretch out your hands and another will dress you and carry you where you do not want to go.

[1 : 06] 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. We are looking at encounters with Jesus Christ on Sunday mornings this summer.

David and I have both gravitated to the gospel of John. John's gospel is powerful, punchy, very full, very well crafted, very pregnant with meaning every single sentence.

And here Jesus has this specific encounter with Peter. And I think that one of the reasons we probably both have chosen John over and over again is because of how much in John's gospel, with every encounter Jesus has with somebody, it's very easy to see ourselves in it.

And with Peter, boy, it is easy to see yourself when you come to this encounter with Peter. We feel, I think, I feel, we feel, I hope, a real kinship with Peter in this story.

Why? Last week David looked at the woman at the well, Samaritan woman, had never met Jesus before. Jesus encounters her and there's an immediate transformation.

[2 : 14] You know, she did not know Jesus and then she knows him. She finds satisfaction in him, the Messiah, and her greatest groom in a way she had never found in other relationships.

That's a type of encounter. Peter's a very different type of encounter. Peter is a long-time follower of Jesus and Peter was a leader, one of the main leaders amongst the apostles.

And Peter said to Jesus on the night he was betrayed, No matter what, I will never leave your side. I will die if I have to to stick with you. And he failed very miserably.

And I think we can come and resonate with Peter so much. Eugene Peterson, a late pastor in the States, he wrote a pretty famous book that pretty much every minister at some point in their lives has to read, called *The Long Obedience in the Same Direction*.

A Long Obedience in the Same Direction. And he took that phrase, long obedience in the same direction, actually from Friedrich Nietzsche, the atheist philosopher, in the 19th century, who used that language to say that anybody that wants to become a great artist or a great scientist or really transform in virtue has to walk the long obedience in the same direction.

[3 : 31] So that's the idea that really any path towards something great or deep change comes from little slow drip faithfulness across long, long periods of time.

So most, Eugene Peterson said, look, most of the Christian life is not mountain peaks, not at all. It is mostly valleys, mostly sad, a lot of sad, a lot of suffering, a lot of hard, and it's slow drip faithfulness over long periods of time.

And I think we can come today and identify with Peter because what happens when an apostle, a follower, a disciple, on the long obedience in the same direction, utterly breaks and spectacularly fails and finds that long obedience absolutely crashing.

And that's exactly what happened to Peter. Peter is a man who found himself crossing a line that he said that he would never cross. It is a man who found himself becoming something that he thought he was incapable of.

And it absolutely shocked him. And that's where he is when Jesus encounters him here. And we can find ourselves. And the question here is, what does Jesus do with such a spectacular failure such as him, such as me, such as us?

[4 : 55] Let's think about that. Let's see, first, the failure. Secondly, the surgeon. And finally, the healer. So first, a look at the failure here.

What happened in the story? Here's what happened. Here we are, verse 15. They've just finished breakfast on the beach. We looked at this passage a couple weeks ago. And Jesus has risen from the dead.

This is his third post-resurrection appearance. And he's having breakfast on the beach with these disciples who had been fishing. And then he turns and he singles out Peter. Now, the reason for singling Peter out is because on the night Jesus was betrayed, in the upper room, Peter opened his mouth.

Oh, Peter. And Jesus said, I'm going somewhere that you cannot follow me. And Peter said, where are you going? And Jesus said, I'm going somewhere you cannot come.

And Peter said, Jesus, wherever you go, I will go, no matter what, even if it's to death. And he looked around, Peter looked around the room and he said, even if all these guys, if they forsake you, I would never.

[6 : 05] And Jesus turned and said to him, you're very famous. You know this story probably. Jesus said, before the rooster crows at dawn, you will betray me, you will deny me three times.

And in chapter 18, Peter followed Jesus from Garden of Gethsemane to the high priest's courtyard. And a young girl asked him, aren't you his disciple?

He said, no. And then a group of people asked him, aren't you his disciple? He said, no. And then a man said, I saw you in the Garden of Gethsemane with him, defending him. And he said, that was not me.

And then John tells us the rooster crows. Now, Peter was very afraid in that moment. He was afraid. He was, what was he doing? He was saving his own skin is what he was doing.

And he was a coward. And he was a liar. And, you know, he found himself in a situation where people can find themselves in situations where you are so afraid you will do anything to protect yourself.

[7 : 04] And that's exactly what happens in this situation. And when you do something like what Peter did, abandoning the Messiah on the night of his death, when he had promised he would stick with him, when you do something like that, there's a sense in which I think existentially you lose yourself.

And you come out of a sin like that, a trespass like that, a crossing the line in a moment like that. And you say, who am I? I never thought I was capable of that.

And it creates a devastating wound, a wound that Peter was definitely sitting with. I mean, he had gone back to fishing. He was hiding because of this wound that had been created deep down in his soul that thought, I cannot come back from this.

And what does Jesus do? It's surprising here what Jesus does. It's not what you would expect. In verse 15, Jesus isolates Peter.

He talks to Peter. He singles him out. And let me just mention three little details that are really important to know how Jesus is dealing with them. One, I mentioned this two weeks ago, but there's only two places in John's gospel that talk about a charcoal fire.

[8 : 18] The first is in John 18, when Peter all three times denies Jesus around a charcoal fire. John tells us at the end of the third denial, and there was a charcoal fire where they were warming themselves.

Jesus in chapter 21, verse 9, sets a charcoal fire for this breakfast. In other words, he's recreating the context of Peter's denial.

And then the second detail you've got to see here to know what's going on is, remember three times Peter denied Jesus' existence knowing him. And what does Jesus come and do? He says to Peter three times, do you love me?

Do you love me? Do you love me? In other words, he's reset the context of the denial. Now he's asking one question for every denial that Peter offered. And then lastly, some commentators will come and say, this is probably private.

So it's probably that Peter was pulled away from the group. I don't think that's the case. It says that when they had finished breakfast, he talked to Peter. Why? Because back in chapter 13, they were in the upper room around a meal, all the disciples, right?

[9 : 30] And what did Peter do? Jesus said, you can't go where I'm going. And Peter said, Jesus, even if all these guys forsake you, even if all these guys mess up, I would never.

And you see, here they are around a meal. It's not private. It's public. All of the disciples there, again, it's a public reckoning. And what is Jesus doing here? He is making Peter do something very difficult, and that's to stare in the face of the very evil that he had committed.

That's what Jesus is doing. And Jesus is asking him to do something very hard, and that's that Jesus is holding up a mirror in front of Peter and saying, look into the abyss of the rebellion.

Look into the abyss of the denials that you said you would never do, that you said you were not capable of. That's what he's asking him to do. And I think you could describe this. Here's what I meant by surprising how Jesus handles it.

This is a, we might call it a tender severity. This is a gentle devastation. This is a loving wound that Jesus is inflicting. He's pressing right where Peter hurts the most, where this wound is.

[10 : 46] And he teaches us something here, and that's this. And this is really what this passage is about. This passage is ultimately about the nature of repentance. And the first thing we learn here is that repentance begins when we stop looking outside of the mirror to the sides at everything else for an excuse.

And Jesus holds the mirror up in front of us and says, you've got to be willing to look right at yourself and right at the wound, right at the sin, right at the trespass, right at the boundary that you crossed, and know what it really is, and really stare at it in the face.

And so he's asking you today something very difficult. He's asking you today to go back to the place, to that place, that moment, that word, that relationship, that addiction, that lifestyle, that moment in your life where you think, that still makes my stomach turn to think about it.

That's what he's asking here. And those moments may be for some of us where we say, I did not know I was capable of that. And it really shocks you. And it could be exactly what Peter's problem was.

It could be that you look back and say, that moment for me was an explicit denial of Jesus. There was a moment in my life where someone asked me, do you know him? And I said, no.

[12 : 05] But no matter what it is, no matter if you think, you know, I'm not really a person that's ever actually crossed that threshold and become what I thought I was not capable of.

I can't really think of anything like that. Listen, on the authority of God's word, the Bible says we have all denied him. Implicitly, explicitly, in small ways, in big ways, in thousands of moments. Sins of omission, sins of commission, we've all crossed that line, the Bible teaches, over and over again. And I think no matter if you're a Christian today or not a Christian, you can come and say, look, I at least am willing to admit I know I'm a failure.

I know I'm a moral failure. I know when I stare in the mirror that that is who I am. That is me. Robert Louis Stevenson, great Edinburgh author, he wrote a number of really fun books, Treasure Island especially, but one of the more famous books, not quite as fun, is The Curious Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde.

And I've mentioned this several times here, but it's such a classic illustration, and it's Edinburgh-based, so it will keep coming. Don't worry. In this story, Dr. Jekyll, this great doctor, physician, scientist, he thinks that he can separate his dark side from his light side, his moral side from his evil side, through education and medicine, science.

[13 : 28] And so he tries it, and he tries to create basically medicine that pulls away his evil and only leaves the light. And what actually happens is that he finds that the more he tries this, the more the evil side becomes the thing that takes over.

And it goes out of control. Mr. Hyde is Edward Hyde, you know, is his evil persona. And eventually, Edward Hyde dominates Dr. Jekyll. And Edward murders somebody.

And this is what Robert Louis Stevenson writes through the mouth of Dr. Jekyll at the end of the book. He said, My potion did not create something foreign in me. It just revealed what was already

there.

With every day and from both sides of my intelligence, the moral and the intellectual, I drew steadily nearer to the truth that man is not truly one, but truly two.

And then he says this later on. I was confident of my goodness, my moral control. I was shocked to discover my capacity for evil was where? He said, always in me, not outside of me.

[14 : 34] Jekyll, he writes, Jekyll, he said, I thought I knew myself until I tried to get rid of my moral problem. And it did nothing but expose the truth. Another familiar illustration for St. C's people who have been around a little while.

Well, in 1961, at the trial of Adolf Eichmann, the man who really orchestrated so much of the Holocaust, a Jewish man named Yehiel de Noor was called to testify.

And Yehiel was known by a pen name at the time. He had written some books. His pen name was Kaseknik 135633. Kaseknik is a Yiddish term for concentration camper.

135633, the tattooed number that he received when he was at Auschwitz under Eichmann. And he testified, and right after the testimony, Yehiel de Noor collapsed.

And years later, 1983, he was on an American news show called 60 Minutes that I used to watch growing up. And Mike Wallace was interviewing him, and he said to Yehiel, he said, what happened to you when you collapsed?

[15 : 42] Were you overcome by hatred? Were you overcome by fear? Was it the horrid memories of Auschwitz? And Yehiel de Noor, really, he absolutely shocked the world.

This was live television. He shocked the world because he said, no, it was none of these. All at once, I realized Eichmann was not the godlike army officer who had sent so many to their deaths.

I looked at him, and I thought, that is no god. And instead, he says this, this Eichmann I saw was an ordinary man, and I was afraid. I collapsed because I was afraid about myself.

That's what he said. And he said, I saw that I am capable of doing this. I am exactly like he. And he went on to say, if I was put in the right circumstance, what would I do?

And you see, Yehiel, he was a reader of the Old Testament. He understood the heart is desperately wicked. Who can understand it? And he understood that if, he understood what the Bible teaches, and that's the real issue is not what we do on the outside, but it's actually far deeper.

[16 : 44] It's the motivation of the heart. And he said, I know what my heart is like. I know what it's capable of. And Peter had shocked himself. In Mark 3, sorry, in Mark's account, I should say, Mark 14, when the betrayal happens, the denial happens, it says that upon the third denial, Peter cursed himself.

He knew. He knew what he had done. And he knew that his heart was deceitfully wicked. Look, when we're afraid, when you're afraid, you'll do anything to protect yourself.

When you're embarrassed, you'll do anything to get out of the shame. You know, when you're angry, the heart can do anything to get revenge. And that is what Peter had to look in the mirror at. Repentance, repentance begins with staring at ourselves in God's presence and really knowing who we are. Now, that's the longest point, and thankfully not the last point, because we do not want to stop there.

Secondly, Jesus, the surgeon. Very brief. I had surgery a few years ago, actually right before Heather and I and family moved back to St. Columbus from the States.

[17 : 50] And many of you have had surgery. It was a more significant surgery than I thought it was going to be. You know, they tell you on the Vance, it's a small thing. And then when you get it, you realize that's not the way I interpreted it on the backside.

But one of the things I know a great surgeon does, and I had a great surgeon, and many of you have been through this, is that great surgeon brings you and puts you on the bed and says, all right, I've got to evaluate and really see where I'm going to cut.

And so in the pre-op, he says, well, I'm going to press on your internal organs, you know, and you tell me when it really hurts. And then they say, is that okay?

Right? And you say, is that a real question? Do I have a choice? I don't think that that's a real question. But, you know, the surgeon does that. He presses and he finds it. And I remember saying, that's it.

That's it. That's what needs cutting out of me. And what does Jesus Christ do with failures like Peter, like me, like you, like every single person here today?

[18 : 55] Jesus Christ is a surgeon. That's the main thing we see him here. Now, let me just briefly show you that, walk you through the steps of what Jesus does. He says to Peter, Peter, do you love me?

Three times. Peter, in other words, first, Jesus does not come and say, Peter, let me list for you the sins you have committed. You are a liar.

You are a coward. You are treacherous. Now, say the Lord's Prayer ten times. And if you really mean it, then maybe in three years of some really good apprenticeship, we can bring you back. He doesn't, he doesn't, see, Jesus sets up the context of the denial, making Peter stare straight at it, but he never mentions it. Not one time. He never mentions a single sin that Peter committed. And instead, he does something far more important. And this is really what the Bible does over and over again. And this is the big difference in Christianity and every world religion. This is what Christianity really wants to come and say to us today, what Jesus comes.

[19 : 59] And this is what he does. He says, do you love me? Why does he ask that? Because remember, in the upper room, Peter had said, Lord, even though all these guys might leave you, I would never.

Now, what is the implied rest of the question? Do you love me, Peter, more than these? That's the implication. But he doesn't, Jesus doesn't say it, but he wants Peter to remember it.

Peter, do you love me? Will you love me? Because you said you would love me more than all of them, all the way to the end. And Jesus just comes back and says, do you love me? And he wants Peter to feel the surgery that is going down right now.

And what is the type of surgery? See, one type of surgery would be where Jesus gets there and he finds that tumor and he cuts off the corner that says liar. And he cuts off the other corner that says coward.

And he cuts off a section of the middle that says treacherous. But if he did that, if he only came and said, this is what you did wrong and this is what you need to do to fix it. Half the tumor would still be there, the bottom half.

[21 : 04] And he does what the Bible does. He goes far deeper than that. What is Peter's real issue? It is not that he lied. It is not that he was treacherous. And he was. His real issue is not his cowardice.

What is his real issue? His real issue is that he said, I will follow you because I am better than them. That's the real issue. You see, the real issue was pride and it was competition.

And in other words, what Jesus is doing here is reminding him way below the issue of your lying, your treachery. We've got to deal with the fact that you are prideful.

And in other words, Peter, you have used me, Jesus, to create, to play God for yourself. You've followed me in order to be better than other people.

And Jesus is saying, you've got an idol down at the bottom of your soul. And that's what led you to betray me. It's not that you lied. It's not just that you're a coward. It's that you've got such a pride problem that you thought you were great and you were playing God.

[22 : 08] And Jesus is coming and saying to every single one of us today, when he asked, do you love me? The question is to go far deeper. Repentance. Repentance is first staring at the mirror and facing the truth.

But secondly, repentance. Repentance is exactly what Peter feels here. When Jesus cuts to the bottom of that tumor, pride, the idol that's really there, and he says, do you love me?

Peter says, Lord, I think you've got to hear it in this tone. Lord, you know I love you. In other words, Peter, the first time, brought his confidence in his competitive spirit.

In other words, at the other room, he said, do you love me, Peter? Oh, yeah. I love you. I love you way more than these guys do. In other words, his God was his pride. Now he comes and says, do you love me?

And Peter has nothing. He's lost it. He gave it away. He denied Jesus. Now all he brings to the table is weakness and his sin, whereby he says, I love you.

[23 : 13] I don't know what else to say. I've got nothing. You see, the second step in repentance is staring at the truth of who you are and then saying, I've got nothing to bring here but my sin.

I've got pride at the bottom. And again, you know, whether you can come today and think, I know that moment that I became the person I never thought I was capable of. And many of us here maybe can't say that.

We can't think of that. That doesn't come to mind. And this, this, the Bible says every single sin, every single denial, every act of disobedience is saying, I'm the master of my life.

My rebellion is based on my pride. See, it's drawing out the truth that's at the, every one of the bottom of every one of our hearts. And so as we turn finally to finish, Peter, in the third time when Jesus asked, do you love me?

Do you love me? Do you love me? It says in verse 17, Peter was grieved. And some people have come and said, you know, he was angry because Jesus kept saying, do you love me? And Peter was thinking, you don't believe me?

[24 : 15] But that's not the word here in Greek. It says he was grieved. In other words, he was absolutely cut to the heart. And what this is saying is that that step in repentance is a step of godly sorrow of saying, I bring nothing but my sin.

I only have godly sorrow and godly sorrow. So what happened with Peter here is the difference in self-pity, self-pity and real repentance. And the difference is this.

It's when you, it's when you do something, it's when you struggle, it's when you feel guilt and shame. And you say on the one hand, I'm sorry for what's happened. I'm sorry for my reputation being hurt.

I'm sorry for what this is going to cost me in public. I'm sorry for losing my job, losing that relationship. That's self-pity. That's not repentance. And this is a, friends, this is a matter of salvation.

Real repentance is godly sorrow that says, it's not about what it cost me, it's about what it cost him. And that's the grief that Peter's walking through. That's godly sorrow. So lastly, the healer, very brief.

[25 : 18] In Mark 14, remember the third time Peter denied Jesus, Peter cursed himself. In Luke 22, I haven't mentioned this yet, I want to close with this.

In Luke 22, it says something, something extraordinary. It says in Luke 22 that when Peter denied Jesus the third time, Peter, Jesus stepped out of the high priest's courtroom.

And it says that Jesus looked at him. And then the rooster crowed. What was that look? That look. Was it like the look that, you know, we parents give to our kids in church?

Or they're disturbing everybody or whatever. And we, you know, give that very disappointed face.

You know, pick yourself up. Do better. What was the look that Jesus gives here?

When you come back to John 21, I think we can figure it out. He said to him three times, do you love me? Do you love me? Do you love me? And he said, so go and feed my sheep, tend my lambs, feed my sheep. And we'll come back to that next week.

[26 : 23] But what was Jesus saying? He was saying, Peter, you are my disciple. Do you love me? I do. Feed my lambs. You already have a job. You are already my follower.

You have not come outside my kingdom. You have not exited. You're already here. You're already in. In other words, what Jesus was doing is he was asking Peter to respond to forgiveness that had already been accomplished.

He was asking Peter to simply recognize grace that had already been given. And when, well, you think about that. Look, Hebrews says, Hebrews says, for the joy set before him, he took on the shame of the cross.

Jesus, for the joy in front of his eyes, he took the shame of the cross. Think of this moment, this existential, the existential weight of this moment. Here it is where Peter has just denied knowing him.

And Jesus walks out now accused, now condemned, beaten for the first time. And he looks up and he looks at Peter. And you see that, what was that look?

[27 : 32] What was that look? That look was not the look of the disappointed parrot. It was that I can sometimes give. It was the look that says something more like, I loved you.

I loved you in that moment. I loved you at your very worst. I loved you right in that moment at your very worst. That's what I was doing. That's why you could never come with me. Because I was saving you.

I was accomplishing the grace that you needed for breakfast at the beach. And repentance, friends, finally, repentance is staring at the mirror that Jesus holds up, having real godly sorrows, saying what my sin cost him, and looking and saying, I am the one that Jesus looked at when he walked out of the courtroom.

That was me. I'm Peter. He looked at me. And he came to you and he said to you, come and have breakfast with me. Do you love me? You're my follower now.

You're forgiven. You're redeemed. Live out of that. You're healed. Jesus the surgeon becomes Jesus the healer in this moment. Now I want to ask you the final word. Have you repented?

[28 : 42] Have you repented? You will know that you have experienced repentance in this way. When you sin, when you cross that line, when you become the person you never thought you might be, have you repented?

Here's how you'll know. When you do that, do you want to run to Jesus and sit at his feet, sit around the charcoal fire, or do you want to run away? That's how you know.

Real repentance. When you've experienced real repentance, you know that it's toward the Messiah, the Savior, the one who looked at you and said, it was my joy to die for you. Now follow me.

Feed my sheep to my lambs. Go and get out there and be done with your guilt. Be done with your shame forever. You can say today, I'm healed. I'm restored. I'm free. I won't be held down anymore like Peter was.

The wound, Jesus cut it out. He's healed it. Let us pray. Father, we all need real repentance. Every single person here, every single person in our city, whether we're Christians today or not, we need repentance.

[29 : 51] And so teach us, Lord, and help us to see the truth of ourselves through this encounter, this Peter, the treacherous coward, but boy, forgiven, healed, redeemed, restored.

That's us. We want it. We need it. Meet with us now as we sing a hymn in that light, His mercy is more. And we pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.