

The Restoration of Peter

TEXT: Jn 21:1-17

PHBF 11.12.17

Scr. Reading: John 21:1-17

BELIEVE! The Gospel of John

Living with regret and guilt can really change a person, can't it? Take Sarah, for instance. Sarah was born to privilege. She was well educated and wealthy—spoke 4 languages, was a trained musician, inherited \$20 million which was quite a sum in the mid-1800s, and had a daily income of \$1,000. She was also powerful—well known in her hometown of New Haven, CN, and politicians and colleges sought her support. But Sarah was miserable. Her only child died at 5 weeks of age, then her husband died, leaving her with her name, money, memories ...and her guilt.

To escape, she moved west to San Jose, CA, where she purchased an 8-room farmhouse and the 160 adjoining acres. Then she set to work to build her mansion. For the next 38 years, she kept men working 7 days a week, 24 hours a day. At her instruction, they built her a morbid mansion as a haunted castle for her past. Every window had 13 panes, every wall 13 panels, every closet 13 hooks, every chandelier 13 bulbs. The floor plan was even more ghastly: random corridors ran every which way, one door opened to a blank wall, another to a 50' vertical drop, a set of stairs ran straight into the ceiling. There were trapdoors, secret passageways, tunnels. In the end, the house covered 6 acres and included 6 kitchens, 13 bathrooms, 47 stairways, 47 fireplaces, 2000 doors, 10,000 windows, 160 rooms, and 1 bell tower in this labyrinth where she lived alone.

Sort of... Legend says that every night at midnight, a servant would ring the bell, summoning the spirits. Sarah would enter "blue room" and meet with her nocturnal guests until 2 AM, when the bell would sound again. Her guests? The spirits of Indians and soldiers killed by bullets from the Winchester rifle. Today, Sarah Winchester's mansion still stands as a monument to a woman's guilty conscience.

Guilt can corrupt everything. It can steal our joy, darken our relationships, and even disrupt our calling. Jesus is determined not to let it happen to any of his men.

v1 After this Jesus revealed himself again to the disciples by the Sea of Tiberias, and he revealed himself in this way.

If you've read John 20, it's a bit of a surprise that chapter 21 even exists. At the end of chapter 20, John brings his gospel to what would seem to

be a perfect ending—Thomas confesses Jesus' identity (28), Jesus promises blessing for those who believe without seeing (29), & John urges his readers to believe (30-31). But apparently, he wants to add one or two more details. Verse 1 connects this story with the previous: "Here's another story of how Jesus revealed Himself to His disciples." Verse 14 closes that loop:

v14 This was now the third time that Jesus was revealed to the disciples after he was raised from the dead.

It's obvious from the beginning that John hasn't chosen this resurrection story at random. There's one remaining character whose final encounter with Jesus needs to be told. Look at how John sets it up:

vv2-3a Simon Peter, Thomas (called the Twin), Nathanael of Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two others of his disciples were together. ³ Simon Peter said to them, "I am going fishing." They said to him, "We will go with you."

After the resurrection, Jesus told the disciples to go to Galilee and He would appear to them there (Mt 28:10). Naturally, some of them returned to their former way of life while they waited. On this particular occasion, seven of them head out fishing. But don't miss who initiates the plan. John is careful to preserve for us the exact dialogue that got them out on the lake. Peter says, "I'm going fishing." The others follow Peter's lead: "We will go with you."

Generally speaking, it's no surprise that Peter leads the way. He's been the leader of the apostles from the beginning. But on this occasion, this little detail should catch our attention. Remember the last time we saw Peter in this gospel?

18:15-18, 25-27 Simon Peter followed Jesus, and so did another disciple. Since that disciple was known to the high priest, he entered with Jesus into the court of the high priest, ¹⁶ but Peter stood outside at the door. So the other disciple, who was known to the high priest, went out and spoke to the servant girl who kept watch at the door, and brought Peter in. ¹⁷ The servant girl at the door said to Peter, "You also are not one of this man's disciples, are you?" He said, "I am not." ¹⁸ Now the servants and officers had made a charcoal fire, because it was cold, and they were standing and warming themselves. Peter also was with them, standing and warming himself.... ²⁵ Now Simon Peter was standing and warming himself. So they said to him, "You also are not one of his disciples, are you?" He denied it and said, "I am not." ²⁶ One of the servants of the high priest, a relative of the man whose ear Peter had cut off, asked, "Did I not see you in the

garden with him?" ²⁷ Peter again denied it, and at once a rooster crowed. Peter's last appearance in this story was his worst. What made it all the more shameful was that Jesus had predicted it would happen—and Peter had vehemently denied it, even going so far as to make himself out to more committed than the others:

Mark 14:27-31 *And Jesus said to them, "You will all fall away, for it is written, 'I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered.'"²⁸ But after I am raised up, I will go before you to Galilee."²⁹ Peter said to him, "Even though they all fall away, I will not."³⁰ And Jesus said to him, "Truly, I tell you, this very night, before the rooster crows twice, you will deny me three times."³¹ But he said emphatically, "If I must die with you, I will not deny you."*

Peter was the disciples' leader, and rightly so. He surpassed the others in so many ways. It was true even in this, his sin. No one rose higher and no one fell further than Peter. After His resurrection, Jesus comforted tearful Mary. He convinced skeptical Thomas. But what about sinful Peter? We wouldn't have that answer apart from this account in John's gospel. This story is all about Jesus and Peter. All the gospels record Peter's three-fold denial, but only John tells of his three-fold restoration. John and Peter had been friends since childhood. What a kind way for John to treat his friend.

We pick the story up again at the end of verse 3:

vv3b-5 *They went out and got into the boat, but that night they caught nothing.⁴ Just as day was breaking, Jesus stood on the shore; yet the disciples did not know that it was Jesus.⁵ Jesus said to them, "Children, do you have any fish?" They answered him, "No."*

Their fishing excursion nets nothing. All night, no fish. Don't miss the comedy here. One scholar points out that the disciples never catch any fish in the gospels without Jesus' help (Kostenberger, p590). (There's probably a lesson in that for us!) Jesus appears on shore and does exactly what everyone does in that situation: "Hey, any luck?"

But there's tenderness here, too. "Children," Jesus calls them. Even more tender is what He does next. It's certainly kind of Him to help these fishermen find success after a night of failure, but it's *the way He does it* that really shows His heart:

v6 *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.*

It's a déjà vu moment, and He's put it together just for Peter. This is exactly how it was the morning Peter began to follow Jesus:

Luke 5:4-6,8,10-11 *When Jesus had finished speaking, he said to Simon, "Put out into the deep and let down your nets for a catch."⁵ And Simon answered, "Master, we toiled all night and took nothing! But at your word I will let down the nets."⁶ And when they had done this, they enclosed a large number of fish, and their nets were breaking.⁸ When Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus' knees, saying, "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord."¹⁰ Jesus said to Simon, "Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching men."¹¹ And when they had brought their boats to land, they left everything and followed him.*

Now, Jesus very deliberately recreates that old memory—where Peter is, what he's doing, who he's doing it with. This is just like the moment it all began! That first miraculous catch of fish showed Peter that this Jesus was holy, utterly unlike anyone else Peter had ever met. This new miracle showed that Jesus was still on Peter's side.

Ever have a spiritual flashback like that—some special place where God first grabbed your heart, made Himself real to you, saved you? Imagine the years melting away and finding yourself back in that place—maybe it's a camp, your old kitchen table, a certain coffee shop, whatever place God did something special in your life. It's almost as though Jesus gives us those flashbacks from time to time to say to us, "Remember how dramatically your life changed after that? If I can do all that in you, surely I can fix this, too."

It's what Jesus is doing for Peter here, but somehow Peter misses the point altogether and John has to help him out:

vv7-8 *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.⁸ The other disciples came in the boat, dragging the net full of fish, for they were not far from the land, but about a hundred yards off.*

Per his usual "act first, think later" style, Peter throws himself overboard and plunges into the water. He has to be near Jesus, so he takes the quickest route to shore! No hesitation. No resistance. John tells us the boat was about 100 yards from shore, but you get the impression Peter would have crossed that distance if it had been a hundred miles.

The others arrive a few minutes later, their bulging net still hanging over

the side of the boat:

vv9-13 *When they got out on land, they saw a charcoal fire in place, with fish laid out on it, and bread. ¹⁰ Jesus said to them, "Bring some of the fish that you have just caught." ¹¹ 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. ¹² 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. ¹³ Jesus came and took the bread and gave it to them, and so with the fish.*

Jesus invites them to add a few fish from their catch to the breakfast He's prepared; so Peter, still pumping with adrenaline from his swim, grabs the net and pulls it up himself. We don't need to wonder what they're thinking – John tells us they're all wanting to ask "Who are you?" But deep down, they know it's Him. This is certainly one occasion when they didn't argue about who was the greatest. ***The Greatest, they now all understood, just served them breakfast.***

You can imagine they are sleepy after fishing all night long. Perhaps Peter stretches out next to the fire and closes his eyes. His belly is full. The sun and fire are warm. His clothes are beginning to dry. Only the sound of his name kept him from dozing off altogether:

vv15-17 *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." ¹⁶ 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." ¹⁷ 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.*

Three times Jesus asks the question. Three times Peter responds, "Yes, Lord. You know I love you." Three times Jesus charges him: "Feed my sheep." How kind of Jesus to lead Peter through this dialogue. The question. The answer. The command. Again. And again. "Do you love me?" "Yes, Lord, you know I love you." "Feed my sheep."

What is Jesus doing? He's restoring His friend, the disciples' fallen leader. ***Jesus doesn't brush Peter's sin aside as if it had never happened. He tenderly and symbolically displays it for everyone to***

view; and then with surprising grace in His words, He buries it forever.

Jesus opens the painful wound in Peter's soul with His three questions, and then He heals it again with His three commands. Peter suddenly understands, Jesus still wants him to be the leader. "You, Simon, my fallen, forgiven friend: Feed my sheep."

Isn't it a wonderful story? So compelling, so memorable. It seems to resonate with something deep and needed down in our hearts. You know why? ***Because it's really not just a story. It's a reenactment of The Story.*** A broken individual, drifting on the sea, confused, guilty, disappointed, disillusioned. A Savior comes and offers hope— forgiveness for the past and a mission for the future. How? His wounded hands and punctured side tell how: sins absorbed in His body, love reflected now in His eyes. The individual is you. The Savior is Jesus. The story is ours.

What should we learn? Three lessons.

1. Repentance, not just "moving on," heals our guilt.

Often when we face shameful moments from our past, our tendency is to just try to forget it, ignore it, push past it. But Jesus does exactly the opposite here with Peter. He brings Peter to real repentance, because only through repentance can we be free of our past. Repentance involves admitting 1) what we've done, 2) to the depth (how bad) and scope (against whom) we've done it, and 3) why we've done it. Jesus takes Peter through all three.

He forces Peter to go back and face what he's done:

- 3 questions – Remember the last time Peter had to answer the same question three times?
- "charcoal fire" (v9) – The only other place a charcoal fire appears in Scripture is at the scene of Peter's denial (18:18).

Jesus is leading Peter right back to the place of his failure.

He also makes Peter face the full depth of his sin in all its shame. Notice the way Jesus worded that first question:

v15 *"Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?"*
"More than these" what? No doubt, He means "more than these other

men,” alluding to Peter’s bravado where he swore his loyalty would outlast all the other disciples (Mt 26:33, Mk 14:29). Peter’s cowardice was worse than the other disciples’ because he had set himself up as superior to them. Jesus’ question forces Peter to deal with his denial, not in a quick superficial way, but in the full breadth and depth of it.

The third, Jesus drives Peter to deal with why his sin happened in the first place. Did you notice Jesus never mentions Peter’s actions—his denial, his cowardice, his lying? His questions go right to the root: “Peter, do you love me?” See, Peter’s ultimate sin wasn’t fear or breaking his word or even denying Jesus. His ultimate sin was pride—He loved himself more than he loved Christ. His foundation for his life was his own integrity, his own performance. Love for Jesus wasn’t Peter’s foundation. Jesus’ question exposes the real reason for Peter’s denials.

Is Jesus just being cruel—making Peter relive those moments, making him admit the horrible depth of his sin? No! He’s helping Peter process the past, not just deny it. Forgiveness cannot come until you take responsibility for what you’ve done. And healing and change will not come into your life until you unmask the monster and see it for how horrible it really is. We’ll never be rid of our sins as long as we deal with them superficially. We have to admit it, confess the full depth of it, and get down to the root reason why.

2. Our brokenness, not our strength, makes us useful.

It’s the paradox of Christian service: weakness through strength. Our cracks make us useful. Our brokenness makes us powerful. Why? Because God loves to use brokenness to show His strength. It’s an old familiar story, this tale of strength through weakness. It’s how the gospel always works. God redeems the world, not through a show of strength, but by becoming weak.

Peter’s brokenness was visible for the whole world to see. He made a terrible mistake. All four gospels tell the story of Peter’s denial. How could he possibly go on from here? He had only two choices... On the one hand, he could have tried to bury his shame in a flurry of zeal and energy. All his passionate service would look impressive outwardly, but it would have been nothing but compensation, covering up, making

amends for the gross failure of his past. He would have become intolerant toward anyone less zealous, impatient with everyone less serious about serving God than himself. On the other hand, he could have been filled with despair, always painfully aware of his weakness, forever hesitant to step up with the confidence of his calling. He might have continued in ministry, but his heart would have eroded away in the acid bath of self-criticism and spiritual depression. Neither option would have reflected the joyful, humble, loving service of Jesus.

No, the only possible way forward for sinners like us is to admit our failure, confess our sin, and stop hiding our brokenness. Honesty like that builds trust. It earns respect. And it leads others to worship:

2 Corinthians 4:7 *We have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us.*

3. Our love, not our faith, matters most.

Notice again Jesus’ question. What quality in Peter’s life is Jesus focused on? “Do you *love* me?” Ultimately, Jesus asks about his love, not his commitment or his faith or his courage.

Friend, do you love him? I’m not asking if you are living perfectly for Him. I’m not asking if you always trust Him. Do you love Him?

It’s interesting to me that Jesus doesn’t remind Peter of the gospel: “Peter, I died for those sins.” I think I know why—He’s reenacting it. A guilty sinner. A saving, seeking God. Repentance, confession, and forgiveness. A meal of fellowship. A renewed mission. This is the gospel, friends. “We are a complete mess. But our future is incredibly bright. Because of Jesus, anyone can get in on this!”

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