

We've come to the final message in our series *Jesus Encounters*. We've been in John's Gospel, exploring the stories of various individuals who had life-changing encounters with Jesus.

And we've been seeing that each of these stories, in one way or another, is an invitation for you to encounter Jesus—an invitation for you to experience his restoration and transformation. Our prayer for you is just that, and I've been encouraged to hear from a number of you that God has indeed been speaking into your lives through this series.

The impact of this series certainly includes the messages we've heard over the past two Sundays, first from our Outreach Director, Bethany, and then from our Young Adults Pastor, Keegan. Didn't they do a great job? I can't tell you how much joy it brings my heart to see some of our younger Ministry Staff Team members exercising their God-given teaching and preaching gifts in this pulpit. And to continue in the vein of having our younger team members preach, I will be bringing today's message...

The Jesus encounter we'll be unpacking today is found in the final chapter of John's Gospel, It's an encounter between Jesus and Peter. Please follow along as I read now from John chapter 21, verses 15-23. I'll be reading from the NLT, *The New Living Translation*.

After breakfast Jesus asked Simon Peter, "Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?"

"Yes, Lord," Peter replied, "you know I love you."

"Then feed my lambs," Jesus told him.

Jesus repeated the question: "Simon son of John, do you love me?"

"Yes, Lord," Peter said, "you know I love you."

"Then take care of my sheep," Jesus said.

A third time he asked him, "Simon son of John, do you love me?"

Peter was hurt that Jesus asked the question a third time. He said, "Lord, you know everything. You know that I love you."

Jesus said, “Then feed my sheep.

“I tell you the truth, when you were young, you were able to do as you liked; you dressed yourself and went wherever you wanted to go. But when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and others will dress you and take you where you don’t want to go.” Jesus said this to let him know by what kind of death he would glorify God. Then Jesus told him, “Follow me.”

Peter turned around and saw behind them the disciple Jesus loved—the one who had leaned over to Jesus during supper and asked, “Lord, who will betray you?” Peter asked Jesus, “What about him, Lord?”

Jesus replied, “If I want him to remain alive until I return, what is that to you? As for you, follow me.” So the rumor spread among the community of believers that this disciple wouldn’t die. But that isn’t what Jesus said at all. He only said, “If I want him to remain alive until I return, what is that to you?”¹

Let me start by giving you some background on this passage. Jesus has risen from the dead, and earlier in John 21, he appears to his disciples while they’re fishing in a boat close to shore. But they don’t recognize him at first.

Standing on the shore, Jesus calls out to them, asking them if they’ve caught any fish. “Nothing,” they reply. Then, in a scene that closely mirrors one of the first encounters they ever had with Jesus,² he tells them, “Cast your nets to the right side of the boat and you’ll find some.”

They do, and catch so many fish it’s all they can manage to tow them to shore.

As soon as he sees this incredible haul of fish, John realizes that the man on the shore is Jesus. “It’s the Lord!” he exclaims. At this, Peter leaps out of the boat and splashes his way to the shore to get to Jesus.

Now Peter had a reputation for doing things like this. But this time, his urgency to get to Jesus wasn’t so much driven by his brash, impulsive personality as it was his profound need to come to terms with his most devastating failure ever.

¹ John 21:15-23 (NLT)

² See Luke 5:1-11.

Something monumental transpires in this passage, and it speaks not just of Peter but also of us. When you blow it—and I mean *really* blow it— what do you do? This passage is an invitation to run to Jesus, like Peter did. It's an invitation to run to the only one who can truly heal and restore you.

And in Peter's encounter with Jesus on that shore, we see **three ways that Jesus heals and restores us from our worst failures**. For the remainder of the message, we'll unpack them. The first way that Jesus heals and restores us from our worst failures is by helping us to face them.

1. Jesus helps us face our failures.

Jesus had anticipated this encounter with Peter, and was ready for it. How so? Earlier in John 21 we read that there on the beach, Jesus was cooking breakfast over a *charcoal fire*.³ This was no coincidence. Why?

Well, more than the rest of your five senses, your sense of smell can trigger your memory and emotions in a very powerful way. Certain smells can make you feel almost as if you're reliving an event from your past all over again.

Do you know when Peter had last stood over a charcoal fire? It was on the night Jesus was arrested—the very same night that Peter, in order to save his own skin, denied that he had ever known Jesus. He did so not just once; not twice; but three times. And it all happened while he was warming himself over a *charcoal fire*.⁴

You see, Jesus knew that the only way Peter could truly be healed and restored was to face his failure. And so Jesus has him stand over a charcoal fire once again, to remember and review— and ultimately to re-write and re-direct— the painful memories of his past failure.

It's important to recognize just how grievous Peter's failure was.

First, he wasn't just one of the twelve disciples. He was part of Jesus' inner circle of three. Along with James and John, he had spent more time with Jesus, saw more from Jesus, and was taught more by Jesus than all of the other disciples. Peter was as close to Jesus as just about anyone could be.

³ See John 21:9.

⁴ See John 18:18.

Second, he was the only disciple who swore up and down that he would under no circumstances ever abandon Jesus, even after Jesus predicted that Peter would do so three times. *Even if everyone else falls away, I never will, Peter insisted. I will lay down my life for you, Lord!*⁵ I mean, the other disciples had their faults, but only Peter is portrayed as being this out of touch with his true inner character.

Thirdly, Peter's failure is grievous because he repeated it three times. Now if you're under pressure and you mess up once, you could argue that your response was uncharacteristic. You'd say, "Wow, I'm sorry— that just wasn't like me. That's not really the kind of person I am." But when you do something three times, guess what? *That's you.* That's your true character coming out.

On the night he denied Jesus, Peter suddenly realized that he had done exactly what Jesus predicted he would do, and exactly what he himself swore he never would do. It's at this point that the gospel writers tell us that Peter went out and wept bitterly.⁶

Why wouldn't he? Imagine abandoning to death the person closest to you, the person who had done everything for you— in order to save your own skin. How would that make you feel about yourself? How could you ever forgive yourself? How could you ever live this down?

Do you have any regrets from your past? Something that makes it very difficult for you to live with yourself? If so, you can relate to Peter was feeling when he ran to meet Jesus on the shore that day.

But if you find it hard to relate to Peter—if you don't have any major regrets in your life— then let me say this. It may sound harsh, but it's true: *Don't underestimate the wickedness that you're capable of.* Over the years, I've journeyed with various people who were shocked by the wicked things they suddenly found themselves doing—things they never believed they were capable of. Sometimes, I've been shocked by my own capacity for wickedness. This is why the Bible says in Jeremiah:

The human heart is the most deceitful of all things, and desperately wicked. Who really knows how bad it is?⁷

⁵ See Matthew 26:33; John 13:37b.

⁶ See Matthew 26:75; Luke 22:62.

⁷ Jeremiah 17:9 (NLT)

This is a way of saying that you and I are more capable of cruelty and manipulation and betrayal and violence and exploitation than we're often able to see, let alone admit.

Therefore, whether you have deep regrets about past failures, or whether you don't, you still need Jesus to do for you what he does for Peter in our text.

And Jesus begins the process by helping Peter to face his failure, his sin.

Notice what Jesus *doesn't* say in this passage. He doesn't say, "That's okay, Peter. I know you were under a lot a pressure that night. It's all good." Jesus doesn't say, "Oopsy daisy. Well, that's why pencils have erasers. Let's let bygones be bygones." No. Jesus does not pedal in such cheap grace that fails to take sin seriously.

Instead, with the aroma of the charcoal fire stirring Peter's memories and emotions, Jesus addresses him by his full, formal name, meaning that the questions he's about to ask are serious indeed:

After breakfast Jesus asked Simon Peter, "Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?"

"Yes, Lord," Peter replied, "you know I love you."

"Then feed my lambs," Jesus told him.⁸

In asking whether Peter loves him *more than these*, Jesus is helping Peter face his failure. He's taking Peter back to his claim that that his love for Jesus exceeded that of others. *Even if everyone else falls away on account of you, Lord, I never will.* Really, Peter? At this point,

Jesus repeated the question: "Simon son of John, do you love me?"

"Yes, Lord," Peter said, "you know I love you."

"Then take care of my sheep," Jesus said.

A third time he asked him, "Simon son of John, do you love me?"

Peter was hurt that Jesus asked the question a third time. He said, "Lord, you know everything. You know that I love you."

⁸ John 21:15 (NLT)

Jesus said, “Then feed my sheep.”⁹

In asking Peter the same question three times, Jesus is helping Peter face his failure. Because how many times had Peter disowned Jesus? Three times.

The text says that it hurt Peter when Jesus asked him the question a third time. Some might think Jesus is really twisting the knife here. But he’s not. What he *is* doing is the healing work of surgeon with his scalpel on Peter’s soul. It’s like he’s making a careful incision where the pain is, where the wounds are, where the guilt is—in order to lead Peter into the kind of repentance that will be truly healing and restorative.

What Jesus is doing relates to a verse in 2 Corinthians, where Paul says:

Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death.¹⁰

“Godly sorrow” as Paul calls it, hurts for the moment, but it ultimately heals. It leads to real repentance and freedom from regret. Worldly sorrow, on the other hand, is a form of self-pity that leaves you filled with regret. It leaves you upset at yourself, for your own sake. It’s all about you. But in godly sorrow, your focus is on Jesus. You’re sorry that you’ve wronged and hurt *him*.

In our passage, it’s clear that Peter is responding in godly sorrow that leads to true repentance. There are two reasons for this.

First, he makes absolutely no excuses. There is no defensiveness in him. He pleads no extenuating circumstances.

Second, he doesn’t grovel. He doesn’t moan, “What a terrible person I am!” or promise to make it all up to Jesus by becoming a workaholic for the church.

Peter simply and humbly appeals to Jesus’ knowledge of his heart:

“Do you love me, Peter?”

“Yes, Lord. *You know I love you.*”

⁹ John 21:16-17 (NLT)

¹⁰ 2 Corinthians 7:10 (NIV)

Jesus wants to help you face your failures. It may be painful at first, but his scalpel brings healing. Will you like Peter stand still before the Lord's steady hand— no fidgeting, no flailing, no excuses, no grovelling—and let Jesus help you face your failures?

We're looking at three ways Jesus heals and restores us from our worst failures. First, Jesus helps us face our failures. Second:

2. Jesus gives us a mission.

In forgiving Peter, Jesus gives him a job to do. Earlier in John's Gospel, Jesus had said, "I am the Good Shepherd."¹¹ Here, he gives Peter—and by extension you and me— a share in that work.

Feed my lambs... Take care of my sheep... Feed my sheep.¹²

Each time Peter affirms his love, Jesus doesn't respond with a pat on the back and a, "There, there Peter, that's all right then," but rather with a fresh challenge. A new commission. "It's time to learn how to tend my flock, Peter."

Who is the flock of Jesus that Peter is to work with? The flock of Jesus is made up of those who follow Jesus. The flock of Jesus is the *church*.

And in restoring us from our own failures and sins, Jesus calls each of us to join him in nurturing his church and moving its mission forward— not as a means of earning his forgiveness, but as a means of living out our love and gratitude to him in light of the fact that he has already forgiven us.

New Testament scholar Gary Burge puts it this way:

Jesus does not come to us as a "single person" (as it were), unattached. He is "married," and the bride whom he loves and for which he sacrifices himself is the church (as the Bible states in Ephesians 5:25). To be in a relationship with Christ and to love him genuinely means we must also love the church.¹³

¹¹ See John 10:11-18.

¹² John 21:15-17.

¹³ Gary M. Burge, *John: The NIV Application Commentary*, p. 598.

The moment Peter responds in repentance, Jesus gives him a mission to tend his flock, the church. Yes Peter, you blew it big-time, but because you're plunging your failure into my grace, you can now lead my people.

Because when I admit I'm weak, when I've come to the end of myself, that's when I'm most ready to be entrusted with the work of God. I will neither be overconfident, nor underconfident, but rather will declare with the apostle Paul that God's grace is sufficient for me, for his power is made perfect in my weakness.¹⁴

And as he shepherds the flock of Jesus, Peter will experience what it's like to let the Lord be his strength in the midst of his own weakness. Because after commissioning him to feed his sheep, Jesus goes on to say to Peter:

"I tell you the truth, when you were young, you were able to do as you liked; you dressed yourself and went wherever you wanted to go. But when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and others will dress you and take you where you don't want to go." Jesus said this to let him know by what kind of death he would glorify God. Then Jesus told him, "Follow me."¹⁵

The original readers of John's gospel would have immediately recognized the meaning of the term "stretch out your hands." It was a well-known metaphor for crucifixion. And while it's not recorded in scripture, historical evidence tells us that after leading Christ's flock for many years, Peter quite literally followed in the footsteps of his Lord when he himself was crucified by Roman authorities.

But crucifixion is also a metaphor for how all Christians ought to live. What does it mean to be a disciple of Jesus? It means you take up your cross and follow him.¹⁶

Before you're a Christian, you basically live for yourself. Sure, you may give to the poor now and then and volunteer here or there, but overall, as Jesus expresses it, you do as you like. You dress yourself, and you go wherever you like.

But when you become a Christian, you take up your cross and follow Jesus. In other words, you no longer just go where you want to go. You no longer just do what you want to do. Instead you ask, how can I be serving the people around me? How can I be serving my Master?

¹⁴ See 1 Corinthians 12:9-11.

¹⁵ John 21:18-19 (NLT)

¹⁶ See Matthew 16:24; Mark 8:34; Luke 9:23

To take up your cross is to stretch out your hands, as John puts it, and when you stretch out your hands you become vulnerable, exposed. Your calendar is exposed. Your wallet is exposed. Your emotions are exposed. You don't live for yourself anymore, but your life is at the disposal of your Lord and his flock. You live for Jesus, whom you love— and to love Jesus is to love his people, his church. To love Jesus is to feed his sheep.

How is Jesus calling you to help tend his flock here at Cornerstone? Maybe he's calling you to engage or to re-engage (as the case may be) in leading or serving— in a ministry role of some kind. In about a month's time, we're going to have a Ministry Fair after each service where you can learn more about serving opportunities. And you can learn more about serving opportunities right now by checking out our Serve page:

<https://cornerstonechurch.ca/serve>

Another New Testament scholar, N.T. Wright, sums things up when he says:

Here is the secret of all Christian ministry, yours and mine, lay and ordained, full-time or part-time: If you are going to do any single thing as a follower and servant of Jesus, this is what it is built on. Somewhere, deep down inside, there is a love for Jesus, and though (goodness knows) you've let him down enough times, he wants to find that love, to give you a chance to express it, to heal the hurts and failures of the past, and give you new work to do.¹⁷

We're looking at three ways Jesus heals and restores us from our worst failures. First, Jesus helps us face our failures. Second, Jesus gives us a mission. Thirdly and finally:

3. Jesus insists that we quit the comparison game.

Check out what happens next in our passage:

Peter turned around and saw behind them the disciple Jesus loved—the one who had leaned over to Jesus during supper and asked, "Lord, who will betray you?" Peter asked Jesus, "What about him, Lord?"

Jesus replied, "If I want him to remain alive until I return, what is that to you? As for you, follow me." So the rumor spread among the community of believers that this

¹⁷ N.T. Wright, *John for Everyone (Part Two)*, p. 165.

disciple wouldn't die. But that isn't what Jesus said at all. He only said, "If I want him to remain alive until I return, what is that to you?"¹⁸

Jesus has just told Peter what his path of service to the Lord and his church would be. What does Peter do then? He looks over his shoulder, and sees his fellow disciple John, who would become the author of the gospel we've been reading from throughout this series. In his gospel, John refers to himself as "the disciple Jesus loved."

So having just learned what his own path of service to the Lord would be like, Peter turns around, points at John and asks Jesus, "What about him?" How does the way things going to pan out for John compare to the way things are going to pan out for me?

Rather than thinking about his own journey of discipleship, Peter wants to play the comparison game.

So often we try to derive our sense of identity and self-worth by comparing ourselves to others. When I get caught up in the comparison game, I tend to see other people as my competitors rather than my teammates. When I get caught up in the comparison game, my thoughts are filled with questions about how I stack up. When I get caught up in the comparison game, instead of focusing on the assignments God has given me, I look over my shoulder and wonder why someone else is more successful or more well-liked or more gifted than I am. Or, I look down on others in order to feel better about myself.

Jesus' rebuke to Peter is a rebuke to all of us: "What is that to you? As for *you*, follow me."

When Jesus forgives, heals, restores and commissions you like he did Peter, part of accepting the commission he gives you is knowing that you are called to follow wherever Jesus leads *you*, rather than the person next to you.

This is one of the things C.S. Lewis had in mind when he wrote *The Chronicles of Narnia*. The great lion Aslan, the Christ figure in that book series, is always telling different characters, "Child, I only tell you your story. I don't tell you anyone else's story."

You see, Jesus' insistence that we quit the comparison game is part of how he heals and restores us. It's how he purges the green monster of envy from within, and frees us to find our home in his love, and to give our life away in loving service to others.

¹⁸ John 21:20-22 (NLT)

When I quit the comparison game, I find my identity and self-worth in the fact that Jesus, my Good Shepherd, laid down his life for me— knowing that he also did the same for you. When I quit the comparison game, therefore, I am free to be me, and you be you, and to rejoice in the fact that as sheep, we each bring different gifts and forms of service to the flock of Jesus, each of which is much-needed. Amen?

Today, we've seen three ways that Jesus restores and heals us from our greatest failures. First, Jesus helps us face our failures. Second, Jesus gives us a mission. Third, Jesus insists we quit the comparison game.

Which of those three especially spoke to you today? That's probably where the Lord wants to work in your life. Let's pray...

Lord Jesus, would you meet us on the beach like you did Peter? Help us to face our failures, sins and shortcomings. Recommission us into the service of your flock, your church. And help us not to compare ourselves with other people. Help each of us to follow you, Lord, walking the path that you've given us, rather than wondering about the path you've given to someone else.

You stretched your arms out in love on the hard wood of the cross for us. Fill us afresh with the wonder of your amazing love and grace that we might live the rest of our lives with our arms stretched open for the sake of others. And all God's people said, amen.

Benediction: Heb. 13:20-21

Now may the God of peace, who through the blood of the eternal covenant brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep, equip you with everything good for doing his will, and may he work in us what is pleasing to him, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen.