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# Comeback from Failure

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*Text: John 21:1–23*

## Failing is Different Than Being Victimized

Sometimes life seems to do it to us. I mean, it isn't our fault. We're victims, innocent bystanders, the people dealt with in a book like, *When Bad Things Happen To Good People*.<sup>1</sup> Someone else is responsible. They did something and we suffer. It isn't fair because we played by the rules, but now we're in the penalty box. We're victims. We see Jesus on the cross, suffering for the sins of others, and we say, "I know a little of what that's like." We're like Mary Magdalene standing outside the garden tomb, the victim of her circumstances. We're victims too. Sometimes life does it to us. Sometimes...

Then there are the times when we've got nobody to blame but ourselves. We blew it. "We screwed up big time" as the youth would say. "You've made our own bed and now you have to lie in it" is an older expression that means the same thing. What I'm talking about is "failure". Old fashioned "you reap what you sow", red-faced and embarrassed failure. We wish we could say, "It's their fault!" but we know it would be a lie. We're guilty and we're ashamed. We blew it and we have nobody to blame but ourselves.

## Nobody Plans To Fail

Nobody plans to fail. In fact, for most of us failure comes as an incredible surprise. It's because we're so sure of ourselves—like Peter sitting in the meeting when Jesus announces that not

only is he going to be arrested, and abandoned by his followers, but executed by the authorities too. "How can that be?" says Peter to himself. "Me? Abandon Jesus? No way, I signed on for the whole stint. Jesus, you can count on me even if the others bail out." We can be so sure of ourselves. We're going to succeed even if others don't. We can't imagine that things could turn out any other way.

Jerald H. Maxwell started a high-tech business as a young entrepreneur that earned him the reputation of being a managerial and financial genius. But then he was fired and his world blew apart. His family found him weeping in his room, his exuberant self-confidence shattered, his world tumbling down, depression pitching a tent upon his doorstep. For the first time in his life he was a failure, and it shattered him.<sup>2</sup>

But failure in Christian discipleship is the most devastating failure of all. Choosing to take up our cross and follow Jesus, but then committing an act of spiritual treason. We didn't mean to, but the realization comes like the "crowing of a rooster". We had our reasons for our act of betrayal against Christ, but they suddenly seem foolish and empty. Our cheeks flush hot with shame and we'd like to dig a hole, jump in, and pull the dirt in on top of ourselves. It didn't turn out the way we'd hoped. We have failed and it hurts. We hadn't planned it to be like this.

## What Now?

Where is Peter when we catch up with him in John 21? He's back beginning to do what he used to do before he met Jesus—fishing at the Sea of Galilee. It's almost an unconscious thing. We're so devastated by our failure that we begin to "no-brain" it as the youth say and before you know it we start slipping back toward old habits and old ways. Old boats and old nets. All night on the lake with old friends. A slow backsliding toward the old lifestyle and behaviour. It's a gradual turning of our backs on our new life with Jesus. An inner longing still burns in our hearts to succeed in the Christian life, but it's dying down and we're pessimistic about ever bouncing back spiritually. Is it possible for a Christian to bounce back? Is failure final? Can we be restored after "wiping out" (to use a surfing term)?

## Jesus the Restorer

The answer is found at the beach barbecue after a hard night of fishing that ends with an empty stringer. The boys are heading to shore as the sun is peeking over the eastern horizon. A stranger too early for the seaside morning market is standing on the beach looking out to the fishermen who are stripped to the waist from the exertion of rowing. It's risen Jesus, thinking about Peter's restoration while Peter is thinking about nothing more than his empty market stand and going home for a good day's sleep.

It's a bit of a surprise, frankly. We recycle cans, bottles, and newsprint, but not Christians. We tend to write people off. We say things like, "Well, he'll never serve as a pastor again." "She was just a one-term missionary." "I'd never vote him in as a deacon again." "She's destroyed her testimony in this town." But Jesus comes to restore Peter fully and unconditionally. Jesus wants Peter to serve him again and he won't take "no" for an answer.

## The Restoration Process

The restoration process is simply enacted in a little drama played out on the beach that day. It begins with what I would call, *going back to the beginning*, and is seen in the conversation between the man on the beach and the men in the boat. "Any fish?" asks the man on the beach. "No," they grouse from the boat. "Throw to the right," says the man. They throw the net and then, as the fishermen in the congregation will tell you, things get interesting. But it's not just the fish, but what it means. John himself is the first to clue in. "It's the Lord," he says. But it's Peter who is struck the most. "It's 'deja vu': the same place, the same way of the day that I first left the nets to follow Jesus. The bulging net, the swamped boat. It is all the same." When Jesus restores a failed Christian, he always takes us back to our spiritual beginnings. It's as John told the Ephesian church many years later. "Repent and do the things you did at first." Restoration begins by going back to the beginning.

Act two of the restoration drama is not unimportant. It's standing on the beach staring into an open bonfire, a reminder of where the failure took place. Breakfast with the disciples

whispering amongst themselves and Jesus quietly feeding them after a hard night of work. *Time with Jesus* is a part of any process of spiritual restoration. Being nourished by him and becoming accustomed to his presence again. He warms us with his fire and his company. We need to be with him again.

But the central act is the conversation after breakfast when Jesus talks directly to Peter about his failure. The question is direct, but not hurtful. It goes back to Peter's earlier promise to be faithful, but it's not designed to shame, but to restore. "Peter, do you really love me more than these?" Jesus wants Peter to *renew his commitment to Jesus* and the response that Peter gives draws from Jesus a request that will be the visible proof that the new commitment has been made. "Feed my sheep, feed my lambs" is the assignment that is made and Peter receives it, never to give it up. But, just a moment, why three times? Commitment to Christ is not a shallow, superficial thing. We must mean it and Jesus wants to know how serious we are when we speak. Don't fool around with Jesus when he comes to restore. It is serious business.

Not unimportant is the final act of restoration: *dealing with our fatal flaw* (what it is that made us fall in the first place). For Peter, it was his fear of premature death. To paraphrase Jesus, "Here's how you're going to die... as an old man. Now stop worrying about it and follow me." If we're going to be restored, we must face the cracks in our character and let Jesus deal with them—our worries, our fears, our confusion, our loneliness, or we are bound to fail again.

### **Comeback from Failure**

It doesn't matter what you've done or how you've failed. Jesus is standing on the beach of your heart this morning. Sure, you blew it. But Jesus the restorer beckons with words of love. Let's go back to the beginning. Let's start over. Spend some time with me. Let me nourish you. You're tired and need to be warmed by my fire. Let me restore you. We need to talk about what happened and we need to renew your commitment to me. Let me talk with you about what I want you to do for me. And it won't be easy, but allow me to deal with that part of you that is flawed in a way that led to your fall in the first place.

Let's sing together our closing hymn and then we'll talk together to Jesus about it before we go home.

### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Harold S. Kushner, *When Bad Things Happen To Good People* (New York: Schocken Books, 1981).
- <sup>2</sup> Gordon MacDonald, *Ordering Your Private World* (Nashville: Oliver Nelson, 1984) 23-24.