

Defining Moments:
Defined by Failure
John 21:1-23

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Text Introduction: We are in a series of messages that we are calling “Defining Moments.” Our lives are sprinkled with defining moments—moments that shape the rest of our lives, moments that are so important that the rest of our lives hang in the balance of these moments.

We have talked about such topics as our births—both our physical births and spiritual births, baptism, and marriage. We even talked about how historical moments are defining moments (wars, hurricanes, etc.) On Easter Sunday we talked about “The Most Defining Moment of all of History”—the resurrection of Jesus.

We have several more defining moments to address. Today, I want to focus on our failures.

Often times, personal failure will define us, but I have a simple message this morning. Though failure often defines us, failure does not have to define us. There are many examples that come to mind. I want to focus our attention primarily on Peter. The Peter that was so powerful in his proclamation on the day of Pentecost, as recorded in Acts, is rather pitiful in his denial of Christ in the days surrounding Jesus’ Passion.

The Gospels tell us that Jesus warned Peter, “The rooster shall not crow this day before you will deny three times that you know me.” (Luke 22:34) After Jesus’ arrest, Peter follows at a distance. As the mob gathered around Jesus, true to His prophecy, Peter denied knowing Jesus. Hear the words of Luke 22:61-62. The words are telling.

“And the Lord turned and looked at Peter. Then Peter remembered the word of the Lord, how He had said to him, “Before the rooster crows, you will deny Me three times.” 62 So Peter went out and wept bitterly.

Do you know that look? The look when you know you have been caught? If you know that feeling of being caught, you also know that feeling of being a failure.

We fast forward several days to several weeks perhaps to after the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus.

Text: After this, Jesus revealed Himself again to His disciples by the Sea of Tiberias. He revealed Himself in this way:

²Simon Peter, Thomas (called “Twin”), Nathanael from Cana of Galilee, Zebedee’s sons, and two others of His disciples were together.

³“I’m going fishing,” Simon Peter said to them.

“We’re coming with you,” they told him. They went out and got into the boat, but that night they caught nothing.

⁴When daybreak came, Jesus stood on the shore. However, the disciples did not know it was Jesus.

⁵“Men,” Jesus called to them, “you don’t have any fish, do you?”

“No,” they answered.

⁶“Cast the net on the right side of the boat,” He told them, “and you’ll find some.” So they did, and they were unable to haul it in because of the large number of fish. ⁷Therefore the disciple, the one Jesus loved, said to Peter, “It is the Lord!”

When Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he tied his outer garment around him (for he was stripped) and plunged into the sea. ⁸But since they were not far from land (about 100 yards away), the other disciples came in the boat, dragging the net full of fish. ⁹When they got out on land, they saw a charcoal fire there, with fish lying on it, and bread.

¹⁰“Bring some of the fish you’ve just caught,” Jesus told them. ¹¹So Simon Peter got up and hauled the net ashore, full of large fish—153 of them. Even though there were so many, the net was not torn.

¹²“Come and have breakfast,” Jesus told them. None of the disciples dared ask Him, “Who are You?” because they knew it was the Lord. ¹³Jesus came, took the bread, and gave it to them. He did the same with the fish.

¹⁴This was now the third time Jesus appeared to the disciples after He was raised from the dead.

¹⁵When they had eaten breakfast, Jesus asked Simon Peter, “Simon, son of John, do you love Me more than these?”

“Yes, Lord,” he said to Him, “You know that I love You.”

“Feed My lambs,” He told him.

¹⁶A second time He asked him, “Simon, son of John, do you love Me?”

“Yes, Lord,” he said to Him, “You know that I love You.”

“Shepherd My sheep,” He told him.

¹⁷He asked him the third time, “Simon, son of John, do you love Me?”

Peter was grieved that He asked him the third time, “Do you love Me?” He said, “Lord, You know everything! You know that I love You.”

“Feed My sheep,” Jesus said. ¹⁸ “I assure you: When you were young, you would tie your belt and walk wherever you wanted. But when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands and someone else will tie you and carry you where you don’t want to go.” ¹⁹ He said this to signify by what kind of death he would glorify God. After saying this, He told him, “Follow Me!”

²⁰ So Peter turned around and saw the disciple Jesus loved following them. That disciple was the one who had leaned back against Jesus at the supper and asked, “Lord, who is the one that’s going to betray You?” ²¹ When Peter saw him, he said to Jesus, “Lord—what about him?”

²² “If I want him to remain until I come,” Jesus answered, “what is that to you? As for you, follow Me.”

²³ So this report spread to the brothers that this disciple would not die. Yet Jesus did not tell him that he would not die, but, “If I want him to remain until I come, what is that to you?”

Introduction:

Steven Pile authored a rather unusual book in 1979 titled, *The Incomplete Book of Failures*. His idea was to poke fun at some of history’s most monumental failures. For example, he wrote about the “fella” who toured New York City thinking he was in Rome. He wrote about the infamous last words of General John Sedgwick, Union General during the Civil War, who died at the Battle of Spotsylvania. Pile indicated that General Sedgwick’s last words were “They couldn’t hit an elephant at this dist...” Among other such stories, Pile included the words of the schoolmaster of Albert Einstein, when Einstein was 10. “You will never amount to very much.”

But the joke ultimately was on Pile, for when the book was printed, the publisher failed to print two pages of Pile’s introduction. The omission perhaps proves the message: We will fail.

In our text today, we encounter a story that teaches us about failure. Peter was one of the disciples closest to Jesus. It was Peter among the three disciples whom Jesus seemed to separate from the rest of the 12. It was Peter who was one of the three who accompanied Jesus to the Mount of Transfiguration. It was Peter who exclaimed, “You are Christ, Son of the Living God” in response to Jesus’ question, “Who do you say that I am?” It was Peter who preached on the day of Pentecost and 3,000 people turned in belief to Jesus Christ. But it was also Peter who denied Jesus three times.

Failure often defines us, but it doesn’t have to.

Several truths about failure seem to emerge in this text that help us to identify why failure doesn’t have to define us.

We all fail.

Last week we said that crisis is inevitable. In an even greater way, failure is inevitable. We don’t have to be defined by our failures because all of have failed. This is the heart of the Gospel. We have all sinned and fall short of the glory of God. (Romans 3:23)

A Scottish preacher Alexander Whyte offered this as the plight of believers. “They fall down, they get up. They fall down, they get up...all the way to Heaven.”

You cannot be a failure because you fail. You cannot be defined by your failure. You can only be defined by your failure if you stay in your failure.

All failure can be forgiven.

1. Failure causes us to want to run away from God, but forgiveness causes us to want to run to God.

I think that’s what Peter was doing by going fishing. He was running away in his shame from the ministry. He knew by now of the resurrection. He just wasn’t sure that he was going to be used in whatever was coming next. So, he did what we do when we feel ashamed. He ran. But, notice what Peter did when he realizes that Jesus is the one giving fishing directions. He runs to Him.

2. Failure causes us to experience guilt, but forgiveness causes us to experience grace.

Again, Peter ran away because of his guilt. The problem with running away is that we experience more guilt—more shame. But then, there is Jesus inviting us to a meal.

3. Failure causes us to cover up our sin, forgiveness causes us to uncover our sin.

4. Failure causes us to feel unworthy, but forgiveness causes us to worship.

Can you eat a breakfast of fish and bread and worship? Peter did. He went fishing feeling unworthy to continue to walk as Jesus’ disciple. He came to breakfast in a spirit of worship at the forgiveness of God.

God is not finished with you yet.

It’s hard not to fast forward just a bit and remember what happened to Peter. Did this breakfast on the beach make a difference? The Book of Acts tells us that it did. It is Peter who preaches as recorded in Acts 2 and 3,000 people are saved at one time. It is Peter before the Sanhedrin who proclaimed, “There is salvation in no other name under Heaven given among me by which we must be saved.” (Acts 4:12). And it is Peter, when commanded to not preach the name of Jesus replied, “We must obey God rather than men.” (Acts 5:29)

Just as Peter, you can begin again today! God is not finished with you.

Don’t be surprised if the hardest part might be forgiving yourself.

Forgiving yourself is really all about Understanding God’s Grace! Rather than allowing your past to be a constant reminder of how awful you are, let it be a reminder of how awesome God is.

Our failures should serve to keep us humble.

Our failures should help us to keep the focus on ourselves and the judgment off of others. We see this in the last part of this story.

Would you be courageous enough to leave your failures at the cross today?