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## A Sack Full of Failures

John 21

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This morning I want to ask you to do something that is really not very enjoyable. I want to ask you to think today about your failures—those times in your life when you really have blown it, or perhaps those areas of your life where you seem to continually struggle and stumble, whether it's in regard to your thoughts, your words, your actions, or your attitudes. Whatever the area, I want you to think on those parts of you that, frankly, you wish weren't a part of you. And I want you to be honest with yourself and with God, because I want you to think about these things just between Him and you.

Do you have some in mind? Keep thinking about that as you listen to the words of author Max Lucado.

The handwriting was shaky. The stationery was lined, loose-leaf paper. The ink was black, and the tone was desperate. The note was dated February 6, 1974 and addressed to the U.S. government. "I am sending ten dollars for blankets I stole during World War II. My mind could not rest. Sorry I'm late." It was signed, "an ex-GI." Then there was this postscript: "I want to be ready to meet God." This recruit was not alone in his guilt. His letter is one of literally tons of letters that have been sent to the U.S. government since it began collecting and storing the letters in 1811. Since that time, \$3,500,000 has been deposited in what is called The Conscience Fund.

What do you do with your failures? Our mistakes come to us as pebbles, and small stones that serve as souvenirs of our stumbles. We carry them in our hands and soon our hands are full. We put them in our pockets, and soon our pockets bulge. We place them in a bag and put it over our shoulder; the burlap scratches and chaps. And soon the bag of yesterday's failures is so heavy that we drag it ...

Nothing drags more stubbornly than a sack of failures.

Could you do it all over, you'd do it differently. You'd be a different person. You'd be more patient. You'd control your tongue. You'd finish what you started. You'd turn the other cheek instead of slapping his. You'd get married first. You wouldn't marry at all. You'd resist the temptation. You'd run with a different crowd. Could you do it all over again, you'd do it differently. But you can't. And as many times as you tell yourself, "What's done is done," what you did can't be undone...

What *do* you do with the stones from life's stumbles?

- Max Lucado, *Six Hours One Friday*, Multnomah Books, 1989, pp. 79-82

Turn with me in the Bible to John 21. John 21 takes place after the crucifixion, after the resurrection, but before the ascension. Jesus has already appeared previously to the disciples, so they know He has risen. And He has sent them into Galilee, where we find some of them as this chapter begins:

**After these things Jesus manifested Himself again to the disciples at the Sea of Tiberias [*Sea of Galilee*], and He manifested Himself in this way. Simon Peter, and Thomas called Didymus, and Nathanael of Cana in Galilee, and the sons of Zebedee, and two others of His disciples were together. Simon Peter said to them, "I am going fishing." They said to him, "We will also come with you." They went out and got into the boat; and that night they caught nothing.**

**But when the day was now breaking, Jesus stood on the beach; yet the disciples did not know that it was Jesus. So Jesus said to them, “Children, you do not have any fish, do you?” They answered Him, “No.” He said to them, “Cast the net on the right-hand side of the boat and you will find a catch.” So they cast, and then they were not able to haul it in because of the great number of fish.** (John 21:1-6, \*NASB)

Now scholars debate over exactly what to make of this first scene in John 21. Some say that when Peter decided to go fishing and the disciples decided to go with him, that he was giving up and going back to his old way of life.

Some would disagree. Some scholars would say they weren't doing anything at all wrong, but they were simply trying to find a way to eat while they waited for Jesus and His direction and His plan.

I would tend to think the truth is probably somewhere in between. Having already encountered Jesus as the risen Christ, I highly doubt that these disciples are now completely turning their back on Him. And yet, in the confusion of their circumstances and in the discouragement of their failure, I do think that perhaps they were on an unscheduled detour—doing the only thing they knew to do, which is what they always used to do before this Jesus had so completely turned their world upside down.

But regardless of exactly why they went fishing, one thing we do know: Peter is still reeling from an unimaginable fall, an unthinkable failure. Most of us know what happened the night that Jesus was arrested—how Peter followed at a distance right into the courtyard of the high priest where Jesus was being held, in that place where Jesus would be mocked, where He'd be beaten, where He'd be spit upon. In that courtyard where the Son of God was suffering, Peter was cozying up to the fire, trying to keep warm.

And in the course of the night, three times Peter would be accused of something—simply being a friend and a follower of Christ. Three times he flat-out denied it—once with an oath, and once with such fervor he began to curse and swear that he didn't know Jesus. Luke tells us in his Gospel that during this third vehement denial a rooster began crowing, and there in that courtyard, Jesus turned and He looked right at Peter. And it was then that Peter remembered His words from earlier in the evening, “Before a rooster crows this night, you will deny Me three times.” Peter went out and wept bitterly. And Jesus was tried and crucified.

Imagine the anguish of that kind of a horrid failure. Imagine being one of Jesus' closest personal companions for years, and then when He is facing His darkest hour, imagine a suffering Jesus looking you directly in the eyes just as you have cursed and swore denying your relationship with Him for the third time. And all because you are too scared and weak and self-centered to even admit you know Him.

What do you do now? Well, in John 21 Peter went fishing. You know, I imagine that many of us have been there. I suspect that every one of us, at some point in time, has been at a place where, through our words or through our actions and our choices, we have denied our Lord—where we have not walked in a manner worthy of the calling we've received.

Some of us have known Jesus for a long time, and maybe you, like Peter, came out of the chute like gangbusters and were ready to take on the world. You were ready to see and to do the unthinkable, and you were ready to have your life completely turned upside down with and for the Savior. But maybe somewhere along the way the fire dimmed. Maybe the direction just

didn't seem so clear, or perhaps unexpected or uninvited circumstances caused real confusion. Or maybe failure and discouragement have caused you to just begin to drift. What do you do now?

The temptation is always to “go fishing”—to revert to your former way of living, whatever that was like, to think the way you used to think, to go to the places you used to go, to do the things you used to do. Please don't let yourself be deceived, even if you've blown it time and time again. Because, friends, God has not given up on you! He still has so much more in store for you. But the thing is, we won't remember that perspective, and we won't know His plan if we don't hear His voice, especially when we've blown it. That is exactly what Peter needed. He needed to hear from Jesus. And he does.

**But when the day was now breaking, Jesus stood on the beach; yet the disciples did not know that it was Jesus. So Jesus said to them, “Children, you do not have any fish, do you?” They answered Him, “No.” And He said to them, “Cast the net on the right-hand side of the boat and you will find a catch.” So they cast, and then they were not able to haul it in because of the great number of fish. Therefore that disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, “It is the Lord.”** (v. 4-7a)

Now tell me, how did they know it was the Lord? They are still a hundred yards out to sea! Well, the work of God revealed the presence of God, and they've seen this before, for this is the exact same way that Jesus revealed His glory to Peter when He first called him, way back in Luke 5. It was through a miraculous catch; and when Peter realizes that it is the Lord, he doesn't hesitate for a second.

**Therefore that disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, “It is the Lord.” So when Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he put his outer garment on (for he was stripped for work), and threw himself into the sea. But the other disciples came in the little boat, for they were not far from the land, but about one hundred yards away, dragging the net full of fish.** (v. 7-8)

I just love that response, because it tells me that even though Peter has really blown it, he still does love Jesus. And in his shame and in his confused, hurt, misguided heart he is just waiting for this Master to reach out to him once again and to receive him. And when Jesus comes and reveals Himself in the same way as that initial calling to full-time discipleship, Peter knows it and doesn't hesitate. He runs, or in this case, swims straight back to Jesus.

Then in verses 9-14, the disciples come ashore and they find Jesus preparing breakfast for them. Imagine that! The One who has just conquered death in the grave, the One who has just risen as King of kings and Lord of lords—what is He doing? He is serving! He is preparing breakfast for them. So they come and they find Jesus there, and they're having breakfast with Him. Then following breakfast, Jesus speaks to Peter.

Now before we look at these familiar verses, I want you to think about a moment in your life when someone has really failed you—when someone you care about has wronged you, betrayed you, sinned against you in a deeply hurtful way. Imagine for a moment that you are sitting down with that person to talk about that situation. What would you say? What would you ask? What would you expect?

You know, I tend to think I'd want some evidence that they are really sorry, and I'd want some proof that they are committed to not doing it again. We might ask questions like, “Why did you

do that? What were you thinking? How could you? Do you know how deeply that hurt me?" Or we might ask things like, "Why should I trust you again? How can I know that this will change? Are you really committed to being different?" Those are all legitimate questions and concerns. But notice now what Jesus asked Peter.

**So 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, "Tend My lambs." He said to him again 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, "Shepherd 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 all things; You know that I love You." Jesus said to him, "Tend My sheep."**  
(v. 15-17)

Jesus asks just one question: "Do you love Me?" How come? I think there may be a couple of reasons. First, that question gets right to the heart of the issue, doesn't it? After all, what is sin? Is it not a lack of love for God or for another? Does it not come from a heart that is bent on loving self rather than dying to self? What did Jesus say to the question when he was asked about the greatest of all commandments? He said:

**"Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength. The second is this, 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these."** (Mark 12:30-31)

The law of love truly sums it up. When we fail and fall and sin against God and people, it is because somewhere, somehow, we have forsaken the law of love. So Jesus goes right to the heart of the matter.

Secondly, Jesus' question reveals again how unlike Him we truly are. When we are wrong, we so often want evidence before we will give forgiveness ("*Prove you're truly sorry!*"). We want guarantees before we will give grace ("*Show me that you've changed!*"). But Jesus, being God, knows and understands just how weak and how fallen we really are. Psalm 103:14 says, "He is mindful that we are but dust."

Years ago the late Rich Mullins recorded a song that deeply touched my heart. It was a song about love, and it contradicted that old saying that love is blind. In "Both Feet on the Ground" Mullins talked about being outside near a beach on a particular Saturday night when he sees this young couple who's all in love. They see him sitting by himself, and he imagines them feeling bad for him. But what they don't understand is that he is spending time with his God. And in the song he writes about the love of God. He said in part, "I am not head over heels and I'm not on cloud nine, and I don't think love is blind, because I know that You see me, and yet You still choose to be mine."

That is what is so incredible about the love and the grace of God. He knew that we would blow it before we had even thought about it. He knew before He drew us to Himself that we would fail Him time after time after time. He knew before He ever let them put Him on that cross, before He ever even became a man, that we would fall down and rebel and struggle and stumble and sin again and again, even after we had received His incredible gift of salvation. He knew us completely. He knew and knows our every thought before we think. He knows our every choice before we choose it. He is not blind. He knows me completely, and yet He still chooses to be

mine. And He knows that what truly transforms a life is that radical, unimaginable, incomprehensible love. So He goes right to the heart of the matter: “Simon, son of John, do you love me?”

Notice in verse 15, the first time He asks the question, He adds a statement of comparison and degree.

**So when they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, “Simon, son of John, do you love Me more than these?”** (v. 15a)

Now, the “more than these” could refer to the fish in the boats there. Or is He saying, “Peter, do you love me more than this old way of life?” But that’s unlikely, because Peter had already demonstrated that when Jesus called him (Luke 5). He didn’t hesitate to leave those things behind. And even if he is now taking a fishing excursion, Jesus knows that is not his real problem. The “more than these” most likely is a reference to the others who are sitting there—the other disciples.

So now, picture that scene. You’ve just finished breakfast with the Lord and your friends—those who respect you and look up to you and follow you, just as they had the prior night when you said you were going fishing. And Jesus asks you right in front of them, “Do you love Me more than these?” Now why do you suppose Jesus would ask him that?

If you remember Peter’s words spoken in front of everyone in the upper room, it makes sense. In Matthew 26 Jesus told them, “This very night you will all fall away on account of Me. But after I have risen, I’ll go ahead of you into Galilee.” And Peter replied, “Even if all fall away on account of You, I never will.” “I tell you the truth,” Jesus answered. “This very night before the rooster crows, you will disown Me three times.” Peter declared, “Even if I have to die with You, I will never disown You.” Peter had boldly boasted that his love, his devotion, his commitment to Christ was not only unshakable, but it was superior. In essence, he had said, “These other yahoos may all fall away, but not me! I am totally devoted to You!” And yet, within hours, he three times denied even knowing Jesus.

So Jesus asks, “Do you love Me more than these?” And Peter is a bit stuck in his reply. He does love Jesus, but he now humbly knows he is not as strong as he thought. So he replies, “Yes, Lord, you know that I love You.” And there’s not a word or a hint of that love being greater than the others. Then twice more Jesus asks, “Do you love Me?” Three times! And the parallelism is inescapable. Surely Jesus asking three times would harken back to that cold courtyard in the night of Jesus’ betrayal. Peter: “I don’t know Him... I don’t know Him... I don’t know Him!” Jesus: “Do you love me? Do you love me? Do you love me?”

Friends, why did Jesus do that? Why did He put Peter through that? Doesn’t it seem contrary to what we just discussed in regard to Jesus’ amazing love and grace? I mean, we know Peter denied Jesus three times. So is Jesus just trying to make him relive it by questioning his love once for every denial? Is this a glimpse of a God who delights in humiliating us and putting it to us when we fail? I don’t think so. In fact, although I think this experience had to be brutally painful for Peter, I believe it was born out of love, and that it was critically necessary for his future success. You see, before the denial, before the crucifixion, Jesus had said to Simon, “I tell you, you are Peter; and on this rock I will build My church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it.” And Jesus said that, knowing full well at the time that Peter would three times deny even knowing Him.

So, sure, Peter has taken a dreadful fall. But, friends, the plan is still the plan; and the call is still the call. And Jesus knows that. But I'll bet Peter doesn't. So Jesus needs to take him to a place where Peter can be convinced that he is still the one that Jesus is calling to lead the church. Peter needs to walk through the valley of restoration before he can emerge and lead the church to accomplish its mission. Jesus has to somehow take Peter from, "I'm going fishing..." to the place in Acts where he will boldly proclaim Christ publicly to thousands, and when he is ordered by the religious leadership to stop, he basically tells the Sanhedrin to buzz off. And how is Jesus going to get him from *there* to *there*? By taking him back, step by step, through his failure and reinforcing, step by step, his calling.

After all, did you notice what Jesus said to Peter after each exchange? Look at it in verse 15: Jesus asks the question; Peter gives his answer; and Jesus then says, "Tend My lambs." Verse 16: Jesus asks the question; Peter gives his answer; and Jesus says, "Shepherd My sheep." Verse 17: The question again; the answer once more; and Jesus says, "Tend My sheep."

"Tend My lambs... shepherd My sheep... tend My sheep." What is Jesus doing? He is reinforcing the calling, even in the midst of the failure. He is saying, "Peter, I know you're not perfect, and thankfully you're beginning to understand that your adequacy and your strength are not in you, but they are in Me. So now get back in the game! Lead! Shepherd! Feed! Do your part! Fulfill your calling!"

Listen to what author Brennan Manning has to say about Peter's fall:

The portrait of Peter, the rock, who proved to be a sand pile, speaks to every struggler across the generations. Lloyd Olgilvie notes, "Peter had built his whole relationship with Jesus Christ on his assumed capacity to be adequate. That's why he took his denial of the Lord so hard. His strength, loyalty, and faithfulness were his self-generated assets of discipleship. The fallacy in Peter's mind was this: he believed his relationship (with Christ) was dependent on his consistency in producing the qualities he thought had earned him the Lord's approval."

Many of us face the same problem. We project into the Lord our own measured standard of acceptance. Our whole understanding of Him is based in a quid pro quo of bartered love. He will love us if we are good, moral, and diligent. But we have turned the tables; we try to live so that He will love us, rather than living because He has already loved us. During the supper of His love, Jesus turned and said to Peter, "I tell you solemnly this night before the cock crows you will disown Me three times."

Remember Peter's hollow boast, "Even if I have to die with You, I will never disown You." Brimming with confidence, Peter had relied on his own resources. But today, these words are a song of praise to Peter. His restoration to grace proved to be such a re-creation that his protest is no longer an empty boast, but a prophecy of God's unyielding truth. For Peter will, in fact, die rather than betray his master, and he will forever remember his unfaithfulness as the moment of the triumph of grace and Christ's conquering love.

- Brennan Manning, *The Ragamuffin Gospel*, Multnomah, 2000

It is when we come to a place of true humility, of real brokenness and availability, that we are most usable by God. When we think we have much to offer and we boast of our great strength, we find out just how weak we really are. And so Jesus must take each one of us to that place where we are emptied of self that He might truly fill us. In John 15:5, Jesus says, "I am the vine, you are the branches. If a man remains in Me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; but apart from Me, you can do nothing."

The truth is, I don't think I ever really believed John 15:5 until God brought me to the place where my failures made it crystal clear. In my early days of ministry, which happened to coincide with my early days of marriage, I experienced such depth of failure in both of those arenas. Day after day, I was trying to be who God had called me to be, and to do the work that He called me to do, and I was failing miserably to what He called me in my ministry. I was trying to be the husband that He'd called me to be, to love my wife in a way that He'd called me to love her, and repeatedly failing miserably as a husband. And God brought me to a point of understanding that apart from Him I truly can do nothing. Still today, it is through my failures that I'm reminded again and again of just how desperately I need Him. And I still struggle with trying to do it in my own strength. But I have learned a great deal about how much I really need God to work in me and through me, rather than me trying to do things for Him.

By the way, why here, in these verses, did Jesus call Peter by his birth name—Simon, son of John—instead of Peter, which is the name Jesus had given him? Again, I think it's a picture that, in his own strength, Simon was completely inadequate. It would only be by the humble dependence on Christ that he would become Peter, the rock on whom the church would be built.

So after dealing with the past, Jesus then turns Peter's focus to the future.

**“Truly, truly, I say to you, when you were younger, you used to gird yourself and walk wherever you wished; but when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands and someone else will gird you, and bring you where you do not wish to go.” Now this He said, signifying by what kind of death he would glorify God. And when He had spoken this, He said to him, “Follow Me!” (v. 18-19)**

Jesus gives Peter a glimpse of the road ahead—a road that will ultimately lead to his own Calvary. But in spite of that, the calling never changes: “Follow me.” And Jesus is assuring Peter here that His grace in his life will be so sufficient that Peter will, in fact, serve Christ to the point of dying for Him.

How does Peter respond? Like any of us would. He looks for someone else to volunteer.

**Peter, turning around, saw the disciple whom Jesus loved following them; the one who also had leaned back on His bosom at the supper and said, “Lord, who is the one who betrays You?” So Peter seeing him said to Jesus, “Lord, and what about this man?” Jesus said to him, “If I want him to remain until I come, what is that to you? You follow Me!”**

Peter sees John and says, “What about him?” Jesus in essence says, “What about him? You follow Me!”

Friends, that is what it is all about. What it all comes down to is that it's not about a list of do's and don'ts. It's not about cookie-cutter plans and paths. It's not even about church, events, and activities. It is about a relationship—an abiding, enduring, living, changing, energizing, joy-filled, personal relationship with God—with the One who created you, who knows you, and who deeply, truly loves you more than any person ever will or ever could.

And this encounter in John 21 is a reminder that even our failures don't change His heart. He loved us perfectly before we failed. He still does. Our failures need not be fatal. Instead, let us allow our own weaknesses and our obvious inadequacy to cause us to run to Him—not from Him—that we might experience His healing grace, and that we might experience a love like

we've never known before, and that we might get right with God and get up and get on with life's greatest calling, which is following Him.

Listen to how author Max Lucado finishes his story:

My oldest daughter, Jenna, is four years old. Some time ago she came to me with a confession. "Daddy, I took a crayon and drew on the wall." (Kids amaze me with their honesty.) I sat down and I lifted her up into my lap and tried to be wise. "Is that a good thing to do?" I asked her.

"No."

"What does Daddy do when you write on the wall?"

"You spank me."

"What do you think Daddy should do this time?"

"Love."

Don't we all want that? Don't we all long for a father who, even though our mistakes are written all over the wall, to love us anyway? Don't we want a father who cares for us in spite of our failures? We *do* have that type of a father. A father who is at his best when we are at our worst. A father whose grace is strongest when our devotion is weakest. If your bag is big and bulky, then you're in for some thrilling news. Your failures are not fatal.

- Max Lucado, *Six Hours One Friday*, Multnomah Books, 1989, pp. 82-83

\*Scripture quotations are from the NASB (New American Standard) translation

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