

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

THE TRUE FRIEND

*“Can we find a friend so faithful
Who will all our sorrows share?
Jesus knows our every weakness
Take it to the Lord in prayer”*

- “What a Friend We Have in Jesus”

Everyone carries regrets of one form or another. But for some, the weight of their past becomes unbearable. Just ask Bob Ebeling, a NASA contractor who worked on the ill-fated *Challenger* space shuttle. It took Ebeling 20 years to finally tell his story about the catastrophic explosion that claimed the lives of American astronauts. According to Ebeling, he tried to stop the launch, but his warnings went unheeded by his superiors. Ultimately, though, Ebeling blames himself. “I could have done more,” he said in a 2016 interview. “I should have done more...I think that was one of the mistakes God made...He shouldn’t have picked me for the job. But next time I talk to him, I’m gonna ask him, ‘Why me. You picked a loser.’”

It's easy to imagine Peter feeling something of the same. The death of Jesus would have carried the same sort of explosive power. Peter had pledged his allegiance to Jesus. But Jesus predicted that by the time the rooster crowed on the morning of his crucifixion, Peter would have denied Jesus not once, not twice, but three times over — a prophecy that came true with devastating accuracy. Now that Jesus had returned from the grave, where did that leave Peter? It's hard to be sure, but it's easy to imagine that Peter's failure had become a catastrophic form of regret. “I could have done more,” he might be thinking. “I should have done more.”

SHAME CREATES DISTANCE

Regret comes in many forms. Some experience regret for things left undone — missed opportunities and the road left untraveled. Others, like Peter, experience and regret for things they've done. What do we do when we feel shame and regret? For many, the tendency is to isolate, to retreat behind the safety of solitude and drawn venetian blinds. But there's a reason why Carl Jung called shame a “soul-eating emotion.” It hollows us out, robbing us of the life we were meant to lead.

I'm speculating, of course, but John's final scene is so saturated by strong emotion that it's hard not to think of Peter as experiencing some form of shame and despondency. And so it's no surprise that he returns to a fishing boat:

After this Jesus revealed himself again to the disciples by the Sea of Tiberias, and he revealed himself in this way. ² 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." They went out and got into the boat, but that night they caught nothing. (John 21:1-3)

Now, to be clear, there was no reason why Peter could not have gone fishing. After all, the disciples may very well have needed the income to sustain themselves while waiting for the next phase of Jesus' mission. But I also suspect that Peter was wondering if he had a place at all within that mission. After what he'd done, could he still call Jesus his friend?

For Peter, shame had always created a strange form of distance. John doesn't record the first meeting between Jesus and Peter — but Luke does:

On one occasion, while the crowd was pressing in on him to hear the word of God, he [Jesus] was standing by the lake of Gennesaret, ² and he saw two boats by the lake, but the fishermen had gone out of them and were washing their nets. ³ Getting into one of the boats, which was Simon's, he asked him to put out a little from the land. And he sat down and taught the people from the boat. ⁴ And when he 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. ⁷ They signaled to their partners in the other boat to come and help them. And they came and filled both the boats, so that they began to sink. ⁸ But when Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus' knees, saying, "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord." ⁹ For he and all who were with him were astonished at the catch of fish that they had taken, ¹⁰ and so also were James and John, sons of Zebedee, who were partners with Simon. And 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. (Luke 5:1-11)

For a fisherman, this was the ultimate miracle. And in the presence of such abundance, Peter could only sink to his knees, literally begging Jesus to depart "for I am a sinful man." Jesus wasn't having any of it. Instead, he called Peter to a new mission entirely: to become a "fisher of men," meaning that Peter would be part of Jesus' mission to bring life back to a lifeless world. And so Peter and his partners left everything behind to follow Jesus.

Had it been worth it? Had Peter lived up to his calling? Maybe these were the very questions rolling through his mind that day, when he set out to go fishing. Maybe he was simply returning to what seemed familiar, a way of coping with his recent failure. But as the night wore on, Peter's nets sat empty, a reflection of the cavity of his own heart.

Curt Thompson, a medical doctor who writes about shame, says that "part of shame's power lies in its ability to isolate, both within and between minds. The very thing that has the power to heal this emotional nausea is the reunion of those parts of us that have been separated." Yes; Peter's sin had caused separation. Yes; Peter's sin resulted in shame and blame and self-reproach. But what Peter never realized is that he had a true friend in Jesus, a friend who was about to bring healing and hope to an empty man with empty nets.

GRACE CREATES NEARNESS

Fishermen would have frequently worked through the night, in hopes of selling their catch by daybreak. As day broke, Peter and his companions were still without a single fish. Until a stranger shows up along the shoreline:

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." ⁶ 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. (John 20:4-6)

Remember: these were professional fishermen. They'd been up all night, presumably trying every trick of the trade to haul something in. So if we didn't know any better, the figure on the shoreline might seem as if he's taunting them a bit. Because of *course* they'd cast their nets on the left, right, and every other way they knew. It would be the equivalent of asking the Dallas Cowboys: "Are you winning this season? Try blocking and tackling."

Maybe they just want to get the guy off their backs. Or maybe they're willing to give it one last try before heading in. Either way, they take his advice, casting their nets on the right side of the boat — and are instantly astonished by the swarm of fish. So many, in fact, that they can't haul it into their boat.

The miracle is almost identical to the one Jesus had performed when he first called his disciples. John immediately recognizes that this is no stranger; it's Jesus Christ himself.

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. (John 21:7-8)

Don't miss the order of events! Peter puts on his clothes, *then* jumps into the water. It's a purely irrational display. We can even imagine the boat passing him on the way back to the shoreline. Once he finally gets there, it's easy to imagine him standing on the beach, panting from the swim, his clothes completely waterlogged. I'm not even sure if he knew what to say, exactly, once he finally stood face-to-face with the risen Jesus for the third time since his resurrection.

In a way, Peter's dive is a reminder that while sin creates distance, grace creates nearness. The writer of Hebrews encourages his readers this way: "let us with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need" (4:16). Sadly, when we experience sin, it's far, far easier to pull away. To run from God, whether it's by spending the night in a fishing boat, or medicating ourselves with a screen. When we experience this shame, it's far easier to run in the opposite direction from God. But this is wholly misguided.

Martin Luther, the founder of the protestant movement, had a good friend named Philip Melancthon. Philip lived in constant fear of ongoing sin, that he could not rise above his own vices. Luther's famous encouragement was simply this: "sin boldly...but let your trust in Jesus be stronger." *Sin boldly*. Luther wasn't suggesting that Christians should take sin lightly. Far from it. Luther was saying that everyone will experience moments of failure. But rather than let those moments push us from God, these failures should cause us to run into the throneroom of grace, where we find help in our time of deepest need. It's not clear what exactly was on Peter's mind. But while he shrank back the first time he met Jesus (Luke 5), he now plunges into the water, clothes and all, in an effort to be near him. That's an image of a man who believes in grace. That's a man who still sees Jesus as friend.

LOVE CREATES PURPOSE

With no small irony, Jesus already had breakfast prepared once the disciples reach the shore, and only asks that the disciples contribute a portion of their catch:

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.

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. ¹⁴ This was now the third time that Jesus was revealed to the disciples after he was raised from the dead. (John 21:9-14)

Two things are worth noting, here. First, the reference to the charcoal fire. There's only one other place in the entire New Testament where such a fire is referenced: in the courtyard where Peter warms his hands alongside Roman soldiers, all the while denying any association with Jesus. Second, John tells us that this is "now the third time that Jesus was revealed to the disciples," and the number three would similarly parallel Peter's threefold denial. It's as if the scene is already set for Jesus' conversation with Peter after breakfast:

When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?" (John 21:15)

Earlier, Peter had declared his readiness to die for Jesus, if necessary. So it seems likely that Jesus is asking: "Do you love me more than *these other disciples*?" Which is a probing question, because Peter's previous zeal had been dampened by the memory of his denials. Peter answers affirmatively, which provokes a threefold dialogue between Jesus and himself:

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?" (John 21:15-17)

That's when it hit Peter the hardest, since this third question only brought to mind his previous denial:

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."¹⁸ Truly, truly, I say to you, when you were young, you used to dress yourself and walk wherever you wanted, but when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and another will dress you and carry you where you do not want to go."¹⁹ (This he said to show by what kind of death he was to glorify God.) And after saying this he said to him, "Follow me." (John 21:17-19)

The entire scene is both a restoration and a confirmation of Peter's call to ministry. "Feed my sheep," "Take care of my lambs." Jesus is calling Peter to become a shepherd over God's people, something that becomes clearer if you read the first half of the book of Acts.

From a literary standpoint, this scene would have explained to the early Christian community how Peter could go from denying Jesus to leading his church. On a more personal standpoint, this scene shows us that the gospel is not just historical, but deeply personal. Peter had met the resurrected Jesus two times previously. But it's only now that the promise of forgiveness and restoration move beyond the theoretical and bandage his broken heart.

Jared Wilson explains that in his own life, he never fully understood the friendship of Jesus until he reached the lowest point:

"In a very real way, at the moment I most deserved to be utterly alone and rejected, Jesus came into that room, sat on the floor next to me, put his arm around me, and said, 'It's going to be okay.' At the lowest moment of my life, I came face-to-face with my real self. And I came face-to-face with the truest friend. I found him true because at that moment I had the least to offer him."

By all earthly measures, Peter deserved to be "utterly alone and rejected." And Jesus comes to him with a display that is both miraculous and personal. No matter where you are, where you've been, Jesus can still be your friend. He didn't regret dying for Peter, and he doesn't regret saving you. He loves you enough that he laid down his life for you, and he loves you enough to look you in the eye, confront you in your failure, then ask you to shake the dirt off and follow him.

For clarity, not all restoration is possible. For example, ministers today may disqualify themselves due to immoral conduct. They may be forgiven, but they can't always be used again by God, especially after a pattern of abuse and scandal. Peter, however, is granted both forgiveness and restoration. But it won't be easy. In fact, Jesus renews Peter's call in the same breath that he predicts his death. Some traditions report that Peter would later be crucified upside-down, feeling unworthy to die in the exact same manner as Jesus Christ himself. Whether this is historically accurate is a matter

of debate. What's clear, though, is that Peter would experience a difficult path, a life that ends in pain, though a life that would offer fulfillment and maturity.

In the children's story *The Velveteen Rabbit*, the main character is a simple stuffed rabbit filled with sawdust — and feelings of inadequacy alongside the fancier mechanical toys who were capable or pretending to be “real.” Longing to become real himself, he turns to the Skin Horse — the oldest and wisest among them — for advice:

“Real isn't how you are made,' said the Skin Horse. 'It's a thing that happens to you. When a child loves you for a long, long time, not just to play with, but REALLY loves you, then you become Real.'

'Does it hurt?' asked the Rabbit.

'Sometimes,' said the Skin Horse, for he was always truthful. 'When you are Real you don't mind being hurt.'

'Does it happen all at once, like being wound up,' he asked, 'or bit by bit?'

'It doesn't happen all at once,' said the Skin Horse. 'You become. It takes a long time. That's why it doesn't happen often to people who break easily, or have sharp edges, or who have to be carefully kept. Generally, by the time you are Real, most of your hair has been loved off, and your eyes drop out and you get loose in the joints and very shabby. But these things don't matter at all, because once you are Real you can't be ugly, except to people who don't understand.’”

Follow Jesus long enough, and you will bear the scars. But alongside these scars you will experience the joy of becoming “real” — that is, of being transformed into all that Jesus meant you to be.

Peter remains unsure about this sour (and uncertain) future. So he turns to John, wondering if John would share a similar fate:

Peter turned and saw the disciple whom Jesus loved following them, the one who had been reclining at table close to him and had said, "Lord, who is it that is going to betray you?" ²¹ When Peter saw him, he said to Jesus, "Lord, what about this man?" ²² Jesus said to him, "If it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you? You follow me!"

²³ So the saying spread abroad among the brothers that this disciple was not to die; yet Jesus did not say to him that he was not to die, but, "If it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you?" (John 21:20-23)

Apparently there had been a brief rumor that John was fated not to die. Jesus neither confirms nor denies this, but simply beckons Peter to continue forward.

This is the disciple who is bearing witness about these things, and who has written these things, and we know that his testimony is true.

²⁵ Now there are also many other things that Jesus did. Were every one of them to be written, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written.

JESUS LOVES YOU ANYWAY

Far too often, it's easier to run away. It's easier to hide — whether that means spending all night in a fishing boat, or in front of a TV screen. But Peter's story reminds us that no matter where you're at, Jesus isn't done with you. Humor writer Dave Berry once quipped that “your friends love you anyway.” And that's certainly true for Jesus. Earlier, Jesus had called his disciples his “friends,” and spoke of the “greater love” that lays down its life on behalf of others. Jesus knew Peter would deny him. And he laid down his life anyway. That's a true Friend. And that's a Friend who “loves you anyway.” Have you denied Jesus? Jesus loves you anyway. Are you struggling with your sexuality? Jesus loves you anyway. Do you live in shame over your past mistakes? Jesus loves you anyway. Regret doesn't have to be your lasting identity. Like Peter, you can achieve a new purpose.