

If I've Messed Up, Can I Really Start Over?

End of our "Tough Questions" Series...

For two months we've looked at some of the toughest questions life has to offer. We've looked at the hard question of **suffering**, the challenge of **evolution**, the honest problem of **religious hypocrisy**, and Jesus' remarkable claim to be the **only way** to God.

We've asked,

"If God loves me, Why am I Lonely?",

"If God has a Plan, What's my True Purpose?" and,

"If I Believe, Why Do I Doubt?"

In every case we have found that **the Bible doesn't flinch** from asking questions exactly like these. Neither does it flinch from documenting human life exactly as it is, with all of its warts and problems. The Bible is the most honest book in the world. That is because God himself doesn't flinch from taking on life exactly like it is. His truth is dependable, and can handle the acid test of life in the real world. So today we go back to the Bible for some real answers to a final Tough Question:

"If I've Messed Up, Can I Really Start Over?"

We want to give a quick "yes" to that question. But **not so fast**, because if we are going to be honest, we have to say that it is hard to start over.

What makes it hard to start over?

I will have to change my choices

Maybe you've made a **poor choice**— like an outburst of anger or a temptation you've given in to like lust or lying or theft - or it may be a simple attitude that I have – like the idea that life is all about me. But if you choose to do something long enough, it becomes a **habit**. Make a habit out of something evil and it becomes a **rut**, and you can't get out of it! Then **it owns you**, and it is hard to start over.

I may have to change my circumstances

Your circumstances shape a great deal of your life. Peer pressure is the single greatest factor shaping the choices of teenagers.

They say, “Everyone is doing it...” Adults aren’t much different. We look around and say, “What would people think...” But now you find that what “everyone” is doing isn’t helping you at all. But if you want to change, you may have to get yourself a set of new circumstances or even a set of new friends. That won’t be easy.

I will have to change my character

This is the hardest part of change because **your character acts like an autopilot** in your life. You know **what an auto pilot is...** It is that system in an airplane or a boat that you can set to go a certain speed and direction. If you’re in a boat and the auto pilot is set for East, you can force it to go West by pushing the rudder around and holding it. But after a while you get tired, and you let go of the rudder, because it wants to go back East – and back east it goes!

Your character is like an autopilot. You might try to change your life by forcibly grabbing the steering wheel and turning against your character. You make a new resolution to behave differently. You force yourself. But the whole time you’re under tension, because you’re trying to go the opposite way that you’re naturally inclined to go. Pretty soon you get tired and you let go of the wheel and it automatically turns back. You go off the diet, you start smoking again, or an deeply held bitterness floods back, or you give into that same old temptation. **If you want to change, you’ve got to change your character, your auto pilot, and it’s hard.**

What’s your auto pilot? Here’s a hint. Fill in the blank. “It’s just like me to be _____.” That’s your auto pilot.

What I want to do today is to look at one of the most famous characters of the Bible, **Peter**. Did you ever notice that the New Testament pays more attention to Peter than to anyone else, except Jesus? Do you know why? I think it’s because he is just like you and me! And he needed to change, he needed to start over, and he did. The Bible documents all that in bold faced honesty, and I want to take a quick look at a few of those episodes from his life today.

Lessons Peter learned on the road to a new start...

1) Follow Jesus to Find Wisdom When You “Know Better”

The first steps down the road to a fresh start in life for Peter began after a long workday. He was a fisherman and he had been on the lake all night, but they hadn't caught any fish. Hour after hour they threw the nets over the side of the boat, and then hauled them back in... wet, and empty. It is exhausting work, and Peter was weary. As they were packing up their nets in the morning, Jesus was teaching, and asked to use Peter's boat for a pulpit...

When he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, “Put out into deep water, and let down the nets for a catch.”

Simon answered, “Master, we've worked hard all night and haven't caught anything.

He couldn't understand why Jesus would ask him to do this. Remember that Peter was a fisherman. Peter was at home on the water. It was his life, his career. He was exhausted, and he knew that there were no fish out there to be caught. And he knew that fish are caught at night, not in the heat of the day. And he knew that Jesus was a carpenter, not a fisherman! Peter had every good reason to be skeptical.

Stand there with Peter for a moment. You can feel him wrestle with it. **Then a beautiful thing happens...**

But because you say so, I will let down the nets.”

Lk 5:4-5 (NIV)

Half asleep, without breakfast, against his better sense, Peter and his friends put out. There can be no doubt that Jesus designed it that way, as he would so many times again. He was training his disciples to **follow him**, even when they thought they knew better. He was teaching them to be willing to venture forth simply on his word alone, to be willing to follow him in matters small and large, to be willing to set aside personal reservations and cautions if we are only sure that it is the Lord's will.

When they let down the nets, they **caught so many fish** that they had to call for help from land. The amount of fish almost sunk all the boats they had!

That day something changes for Peter. From this day on, the motto of Peter's life would become, "Because you say so..." It would be a life lesson.

When you start down the road to a fresh start, there is no possibility of making progress if you do it your way. That's what got you in trouble in the first place. You need a trustworthy guide, who knows you and knows God and knows how to get you a fresh start. That is why **following Jesus is so important**, even when you think you know better than he does. It was Peter's first step... & one of the most important, on the road to a fresh start.

2) Follow Jesus to Find Forgiveness When You Fail

We jump forward about three years in Peter's life to another critical moment. During these years, Peter's real character would emerge. That happens when you follow Jesus. Peter is a natural leader who is **wildly inconsistent** in his character; he keeps professing great things, but regularly bails out, trips up, falls short... But he wouldn't leave Jesus' side. We are now at the beginning of the last week of Jesus' life, and Peter didn't know it yet... but he was walking into a week that would leave him broken and battered and crushed. He was walking into that place where he would need help like he had never needed before.

We see a **hint** of this Thursday night. Jesus predicts again his death and Peter says..

"Lord, I am ready to go with you to prison and to death."

It is the same old Peter... Confident of his ability to give it all. But Jesus knew that there was an old autopilot in Peter, a character issue dragging him a different way. And now Jesus moved to put it right out on the table.

Jesus answered, "I tell you, Peter, before the rooster crows today, you will deny three times that you know me."

Lk 22:31-34

Peter swore that would never happen. *"Though all else leave you, I will not."*

With everything in him, Peter was devoted to Jesus. That was just the problem. Peter thought that **everything in him was enough.** He had no room to admit the possibility of **betrayal** that lay in his own heart. He had no capacity to admit his own **weakness**, no room to confess his own **fear...**

Jesus says "you will betray me". Peter says "I will not".

Jesus says "tonight... three times..." Peter says, "I will never..."

What is it with Peter? What is it with us? Why are we so overconfident about our own strength, so certain of our own wisdom, so dedicated to our **pride**, our **dignity**?

Jesus is not surprised at any of this. He knows all about it. Late that evening, Jesus has been arrested, the disciples have all fled. 3 times Peter has been questioned about whether he is one of Jesus' disciples. 3 times he has denied it. Finally, as dawn breaks, across a courtyard, **Jesus' and Peter's eyes meet...**

The Lord turned and looked straight at Peter. Then Peter remembered the word the Lord had spoken to him: "Before the rooster crows today, you will disown me three times." And he went outside and wept bitterly.

Lk 22:61-62 (NIV)

Peter knows that Jesus knows; no words are needed. Jesus' **look sinks to the core of Peter's heart.** **The scriptures simply say Peter,** *"went outside and wept bitterly."*

He weeps for the Savior he has so miserably failed. And he weeps for himself. **That day something changes for Peter: he is broken. It would be a life lesson.**

Peter thinks it is all over. But it is not all over. Centuries before, Isaiah wrote:

*A Message from the high and towering God,
who lives in Eternity, whose name is Holy:*

*"I live in the high and holy places,
but also with the low-spirited, the spirit-crushed,
And what I do is put new spirit in them,*

get them up and on their feet again.

Is 57:15 (The Message)

Peter is filled with shame, but Jesus is filled with something quite different, and **he heads on to the suffering** that lays before him, to win for Peter and everyone who has failed what we could never win for ourselves. Peter doesn't know it, but **in the ashes of his greatest failure are the seeds of his healing.**

3) Follow Jesus to Find Healing for Your Heart

We walk forward several weeks. The world has changed in these weeks. Jesus gave his life for us that day. And three days later God raised him. Peter knows all this, and has been told by Jesus to go to Galilee and expect to see him there. **Peter is a different man. He has been broken in the hands of Jesus.** There are a lot of ways you can be broken by life, but when you have been broken in the hands of Jesus, it is a good thing. A wonderful thing. A lot of us have been broken in the hands of Jesus.

As you look at Peter from this time on, **he is no longer full of himself. Still ashamed**, I would guess, of his weaknesses. **Still stinging** from his betrayal. But grateful beyond words for the deep, deep love of Jesus...

One more time, Peter and his fellow disciples **go out fishing**. One more night of hard work – and again they catch nothing. Then as they are coming in – well, John tells about it in his own words...

Early in the morning, Jesus stood on the shore, but the disciples did not realize that it was Jesus.

He said, "Throw your net on the right side of the boat and you will find some."

They weren't sure it was him, but maybe it was **a familiar sound** in that distant voice. Maybe it was a **memory** of that day on the lake 3 years earlier. Maybe it was **lesson after lesson** when he had taught them to follow simply on his word alone. I suspect they looked for a moment at each other, and then the net was dropped over the edge of the boat.

When they did, they were unable to haul the net in because of the large number of fish. Jn 21:4-6 (NIV)

John whispers, "It is the Lord!" Peter **dives** into the water and splashes his way to the shore. **After a failure, too many of us run from the Lord.** If we've made a mistake, our first reaction is to flee in shame. We leave our ministry.

Disappear from worship. We put the Bible away. We stop praying. Drop out of fellowship. We give up. It is exactly the worst move we can make.

But Peter **cannot get to Jesus too quickly**. He has learned that **there is more mercy in Christ than there is sin in us**. After breakfast, there is one more heart to heart moment with Peter...

Jesus said to Simon Peter, “Simon son of John, do you truly love me more than these?” Jn 21:15 (NIV)

Perhaps Jesus sweeps his hand across the beach, littered now with the great catch of fish, the boats and the nets, once the career ambition of Peter. Perhaps his hand also sweeps past the other disciples, the great friends of Peter’s life. Peter simply says...

“Yes, Lord,” he said, “you know that I love you.”

A lot of people say they love the Lord. But the question **asked after 3 years** together is different. The question asked **after Peter’s failure** is different. So a **second time Jesus asks...** *“Simon son of John, do you truly love me?”* And a second time the response is given...

“Yes, Lord,” he said, “you know that I love you.”

Then Jesus asks a third time, and Peter is crushed. **Three times, once for each denial**. But Jesus will **step down to the very bottom of Peter’s heart**. And from the bottom of his heart, Peter finally says, *“Lord, you know all things. You know that I love you.”*

Jesus did **know all things**, and Peter knows that Jesus knows – even what was **at the bottom of the heart**. He knew the boasting and the pride, and he knew the brokenness and the need. And now Jesus reaches into the ashes of Peter’s heart and asks the question of love.

That day something changes for Peter: out of the ashes and the brokenness, he yields to the love of Jesus. It would be the life lesson. Peter would rise up from that beach and give the rest of his life to pastoring the flock that Jesus loves.

It may be ashes and brokenness for you. You may be facing changes your choices - circumstances – character. He can see you through it all. Do you love him? (3x)