

NEW FAILURES

SERIES: PETER'S PROGRESS

By Danny Hall

In the latter half of 1974 and the early half of 1975, life was really good. I had become a Christian about three years earlier, and I had seen God do some great things for me. He had totally changed the direction of my life and had brought me to a new place. He had given me incredible opportunities to be involved in ministry, probably way beyond anything that I was capable of doing. But God was gracious in that. He had changed my motivations, my values, everything that was important to me. I went off to Bible college because I wanted to learn the word of God more. Nothing excited me more than studying the Scriptures, teaching them, and just being involved in people's lives.

Then God brought Ginger into my life, and even though we were young, we were married, a little over thirty years ago. What a wonderful time! He gave us a house to live in. It was very small but fully furnished, and we rented it for—are you ready for this?—\$60 a month. Even in 1974 in South Carolina, that was cheap. Times were great!

But somewhere in the first six months of married life, I woke up one morning, and I don't remember the exact surrounding circumstances, but I felt totally shocked and disappointed with

myself, because I had begun to realize that I had an enormous capacity to be self-centered. I don't know why that surprised me, but it did. In those first three years or so of walking with the Lord, when he did so much for me and gave me so many opportunities, I think I actually came to believe that I was more or less "over the hump." Life was good, God was good, ministry was good, and I was good. Everything was good. Then, wham! Our getting married, like any intense relationship, brought us into some difficulty. All of a sudden I began to realize that I still had a lot of problems to deal with. I was frustrated. "What in the world is going on?" I wondered. God had to open my eyes to something very important: we were in this for the long haul. "I'm in it with you," he was saying, "but there's a lot of work to be done. And I love you enough that I want to graciously keep you going." Sometimes we are very painfully aware of sin, and sometimes we are in denial, but we have to realize that we are all in process. None of us has arrived yet.

One of the things I love about the story of Peter's life is how God takes him through some of the same steps that we have to go through, in the process of growing him up to be the man that he called him to be. Now we have come to a point in Peter's life when he might easily say, just as I did, "Life is good." He's come a long way. Even though he's facing persecution as a leader in the church, when he gets put in jail, angels open jail doors, and there are miraculous deliverances. The church is growing, and he's a leader. So life seems good.

Think for a moment about where Peter has come from in this journey. He started out as a fisherman on the shores of Galilee, and Jesus called him. Peter left everything to follow Jesus, but his journey was an up-and-down one. God opened his eyes to greater and greater truths about

who Messiah was, and Peter grew to understand that Jesus was Messiah. But he went through some rocky times, including that darkest moment, perhaps, when he betrayed Jesus on the eve of his crucifixion. God took him through that weekend and brought him out the other side. Eventually Peter would be endowed with the power of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost, and would emerge as a spokesperson for the gospel, a bold and fearless proclaimer of the truth. His understanding of who Messiah was grew greatly.

In the last message (Discovery Paper 4923), in the story of Cornelius recorded in Acts 10-11, God broadened Peter's understanding of what the kingdom of God was all about. No longer was he to understand the kingdom of God as something rooted in Jewish ethnicity. Far beyond that, God was calling out a worldwide people for himself of both Jews and Gentiles. God used Peter to throw the door wide open for the Gentile world to hear the gospel message. So indeed, things were going well for Peter.

Then we come to a wonderful little incident recorded for us in Scripture that reminds us, lest we conclude that Peter has fully arrived, being a big leader of the church, with everything going fine, that he can still get it wrong sometimes. His life is one of spiritual progress in which God continually has to change him and work in him, and he will always be dependent on God's transforming grace. In the story we'll look at here, we'll examine one of Peter's failures. This story is in Galatians 2. It's not recorded in the book of Acts, and Peter himself doesn't comment on it in his own writings. But in an encounter he has with the apostle Paul, we are given a window into the struggle that all of us will have in living faithfully to our calling to the gospel. In Galatians Paul is dealing with the same important question that we looked at in the last message:

Just what is the kingdom of God, and who belongs?

The issue that has come to the fore, of course, is that now as the gospel is spreading farther and farther into Gentile territory, what is to be done with all these Gentile converts? At its birth the church was located in Jerusalem, the heart of Judaism, so all the early converts were Jews. So the issue of what was to happen to the non-Jew had to come into play, as we saw in the last message. Now the gospel has even gone farther, and more and more Gentiles have come into the church. There is a big controversy over what to do about them. A large faction believes that all of these new converts should have to become Jews as well, for after all, Messiah is Jewish, and the Jews are the ones through whom God has chosen to bless the world. Paul, of course, along with Peter, has seen God open the door to the Gentiles, and early on he has seen this point of view as a great threat to the church. So he wrote the letter to the Galatians to address this issue.

In order to establish his authority to deal with this issue, in the beginning of this book Paul describes a lot of his personal history. In the first couple of chapters, Paul is basically saying to the Galatians, “I have the right to speak about this issue to you because God called me to be the apostle to the Gentiles and gave me the gospel message. I was a partner with the other apostles, equal to and respected by them. I wasn’t beneath them, and I haven’t messed up their message. I had interchange with the other great leaders of the church in Jerusalem, and we’re all on the same page.”

In part of Paul’s discussion about his own place in the early church, he tells of an encounter he had with the apostle Peter. That’s the story we’ll focus on in this message.

Hypocrisy and its consequences

Galatians 2:11-14:

When Peter came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he was clearly in the wrong. Before certain men came from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles. But when they arrived, he began to draw back and separate himself from the Gentiles because he was afraid of those who belong to the circumcision group. The other Jews joined him in his hypocrisy, so that by their hypocrisy even Barnabas was led astray.

When I saw that they were not acting in line with the truth of the gospel, I said to Peter in front of them all, “You are a Jew, yet you live like a Gentile and not like a Jew. How is it, then, that you force Gentiles to follow Jewish customs?”

Paul talked earlier about some visits he made to Jerusalem. In 2:1 he talked about his going up to Jerusalem with Barnabas. There has been a great deal of debate about which trip to Jerusalem that was. There are at least four or five recorded trips Paul took to Jerusalem once he started his ministry. Some people believe this was the trip that is recorded at the end of Acts 11, where Paul and Barnabas went up to Jerusalem to bring a gift for the fellow believers in Jerusalem who were

suffering some financial need during a famine. Others believe this was the trip that is recorded in Acts 15, when Paul went up to be part of a larger discussion about this whole issue of what was to happen to the Gentile believers. There are arguments on both sides of the case, and I won't take time here to delineate all of them. But we know at least this: Paul's trip to Jerusalem and Peter's subsequent trip to Antioch happened after Peter's encounter with Cornelius in Acts 10-11. That was when, as I mentioned, God graciously allowed Peter to open the door of the gospel to the Gentiles, after giving him a vision teaching him that all people in all places are precious in God's sight. Peter saw the Spirit of God descend on those Gentiles, demonstrating that God saved them just as he saved him, and he saved him just as he saved them. He saw that the markers of the people of God were no longer the ethnic markers of Judaism, but faith and the presence of the Holy Spirit.

Now, for some reason we're not sure of, Peter goes to Antioch. When he gets there, he joins in the fellowship of the church, and we are told that he sits down to eat with the Gentile believers. That may seem a small thing to many of us, but even today in many cultures of the world (perhaps the one you yourself came from), eating a meal with someone is a very intimate, important act of fellowship and connectivity. It indicates a level of acceptance of the person. It is a sign of openness to relationship, a sign that you're both in the same body or social setting. In the Jewish culture of that time it was a huge matter whom you sat down at table with. So Peter goes to Antioch, and he is thrilled about how the church is growing and people are coming to Christ, Gentile and Jew alike, and he sits down with them for meals.

Then another group of men comes to Antioch "from James." We don't know their purpose in

coming or their connection to James, just that for some reason James sends them to check on the situation in Antioch. Now, if this incident takes place after the Acts 15 council, the church would have already hashed out its stand on Jewish and Gentile believers, and would have come to the conclusion that no Gentile should ever be burdened with having to become Jewish. Males do not have to go through circumcision. It isn't about keeping the Law (Torah); rather, it is about faith in Christ. But for some, even though they don't believe that these Gentile believers have to become Jewish or to be circumcised, no one ever said you had to eat with them! Nobody ever said you had to have intimate fellowship with them. It seems that these emissaries from James have an attitude of separation from their Gentile brothers and sisters in Christ.

When they arrive, for whatever reason, Peter withdraws from regular fellowship with the Gentiles and will not sit and eat with them, but will eat only with his Jewish brothers. Why Peter does that is unclear to us. But he may have some reason to be intimidated by these men. Paul says, "He was afraid of those who belong to the circumcision group." It might be he simply wants to save face, to avoid being seen as someone who has lost some of his Jewishness. It might be that as a leader in the church in Jerusalem, Peter is thinking that if he just placates these men, sticks to eating with them while they're there, then when he gets back home, there won't be any trouble. But if he sits there in front of them and eats with the Gentiles and they get all upset about it, then when he goes back to Jerusalem, he'll have a big problem to deal with. And maybe he just doesn't want to face that.

But when Paul sees Peter withdraw from fellowship with the Gentile converts and eat only with these Jewish men, he is livid! Verse 11 says, "I opposed him to his face because he was clearly

in the wrong.” That sounds pretty strong, but the word translated “clearly in the wrong” is actually a much harsher word that means “condemned.” Paul sees this for what it is. Peter, the champion of the church, the great preacher on the day of Pentecost, the one through whom God has thrown the door open to the Gentiles, has really messed up here. He is undermining the very heart of the message of the gospel and the unity and fellowship of the church. Paul is angry and says, “Peter stands condemned!” There is no excuse or explanation for Peter’s action; it’s just plain wrong.

Paul then says he confronts Peter because of the seriousness of this matter. Notice the word he chooses: “hypocrisy.” This is a great word. It comes from the world of the ancient Greek theater. Back then, without benefit of special effects and Hollywood makeup artists, to show different characterizations they would hold up masks in front of their faces. The word for taking up the role of the mask was “to be a hypocrite.” That word came to be used for people who would present themselves as something other than what they were, more in the way we use the word “hypocrite.” So Peter has slipped into a role here: that of the good Jew. But in so doing, he has betrayed his position as an apostle and a follower of Christ and a champion of the kingdom of God.

Then Paul goes on to say, not only is Peter a hypocrite, but the atmosphere around that is so intense, it leads even Barnabas astray. When you read those words “even Barnabas,” you can just feel a knife going through Paul’s heart. Barnabas is the one who came alongside him and disciples him. Barnabas has been his partner in ministry for several years now, the one his life has been most closely knit to, the one who has gone with him to take the gospel out into new

regions of the Roman Empire, farther into Gentile territory. Barnabas is probably Paul's best friend.

So in this situation of hypocrisy, Paul has to get in Peter's face, and he calls him out in front of everyone else: "Peter, even you can't fulfill the Jewish law. Why are you imposing Jewish customs on these Gentile believers?" So he calls Peter to account.

Now, what difference does all this make to us?

Honesty and godly influence

Peter has failed in precisely the area where God has entrusted him with his greatest responsibility, the very proclamation of the gospel, the establishment and expansion of the kingdom of God. You and I might say, "Well, I'm not Peter; I don't have that kind of responsibility." But the truth is that the areas that you and I are most likely to be challenged in are also the areas of our greatest responsibility: our families, our neighborhoods, our jobs.

There were two ways Peter was challenged that we need to take note of. First was the issue of hypocrisy. Peter wanted to be accepted by those men sent by James, to be comfortable with them. He was trying his best to play both ends against the middle. So he thought he would walk away from these Gentile believers for just a short time, go fellowship with the Jewish group, who would be leaving soon, and then everything would be okay, and he could go back to

fellowshipping with the Gentiles, and no one would be angry. He was just trying to be comfortable, to keep everybody happy. But in so doing, he compromised the core of who he was and the core of the gospel message that he was trying to preach.

Now, we all like to be comfortable and to be liked. Whatever setting we walk into, our minds are calculating from the get-go, “How can I fit in? How can I make myself acceptable so I will feel comfortable?” Whether it’s a family reunion, the workplace, or coming home from work, when we walk in the door, that’s what we’re thinking about. Part of what we’re doing is putting on a mask. We’re creating what we hope will be an acceptable persona, because we don’t want to get into tough situations and issues. We want to feel comfortable. Now, this was Peter, who had already gone to jail for the gospel two or three times! But when faced with this crisis, as we do many times, he allowed himself to be caught up in a sense of self-protectiveness, and fell into hypocrisy. He put a mask up and created a persona that he hoped would help him slide through this difficult period without challenge.

There’s also an issue of leadership. Never, ever underestimate your influence. You may say, “Well, I’m not Peter. I don’t have thousands of people listening to me preach. I’m not the leader of a church who influences so many lives.” But the truth of it is, it is amazing how much our lives do influence others. Peter made this mistake and fell into hypocrisy, and then other people followed, even Barnabas, who should have known better. When we begin to follow Christ, we never imagine what an enormous amount of influence we have. When I was in the college ministry, I often used to tell the college students, “Whether or not it’s right or fair, the truth is that a lot of people are making decisions about God based on what they see in your life. They

may be stupid or crazy to do it, but it's true." Now, this is not to load you up with guilt, but to remind you that if Peter himself was in a lifelong process of being changed through God's grace, you and I dare not think we've arrived. We need God's grace every moment of the day.

Now, what we don't have in this story is some conclusion from Peter's perspective. We don't know what effect Paul's confrontation had on him in that moment. But we have to assume, based on the trajectory of Peter's life after that as he continued to be a leader in the church, and would later in life write some wonderful, penetrating books of the New Testament (1 and 2 Peter), that he learned from this. In fact, Peter wrote this wonderful passage in 2 Peter 1:3-8, which we're going to look at in a later message:

"His divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. Through these he has given us very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature and escape the corruption in the world caused by evil desires.

For this very reason, make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness; and to godliness, brotherly kindness; and to brotherly kindness, love. For if you possess these qualities in increasing measure, they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ."

Peter realized it was a process. He was saying, “You’ve been given everything you need in Christ, so with all diligence, keep growing, keep going, keep letting Christ change your life.”

In our home fellowship group we’ve recently been studying Ephesians 4, where, after building a wonderful theology of how God has brought Jew and Gentile alike into the body of Christ and taken down all the barriers to unite them in Christ, Paul gives some practical out-workings of living a godly life as the united body of Christ. In 4:25ff there’s a series of admonitions about behavior that a person following God should have. Almost every one of his admonitions has some relationship to the nature of the body of Christ. The negative admonitions address things that tear at the fabric of unity, like controlling our speech and saying only things that are edifying. Right in the middle of all that, he drops this statement: “And do not grieve the Holy Spirit, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption.” What marks us out as the people of God, as we found in the last message, is the presence of the Holy Spirit in us. It is God’s Spirit who unites us as the body of Christ. Paul is saying that when we behave in a way that rips apart the fabric of the unity of the body, it grieves the Holy Spirit.

The only way out of that is honesty and transparency with one another, not putting up masks, not playing roles to try to be comfortable and acceptable in whatever context we’re in, particularly in the church. We need to encourage one another in honesty, and we also need accountability. God brought accountability into Peter’s life through Paul, who was willing to get in his face and say, “You stand condemned, Peter! There’s no way you can justify this behavior.” Depending on the relationship and the nature of the issue, obviously that kind of accountability will look and feel

different, but if we're going to have spiritual progress, just as Peter needed someone to speak into his life, you and I need people to speak into our lives.

I urge all of us to hold fast to the glorious truth of the gospel and its transforming power in our life. That will be a wonderful witness to the world we're trying to reach with God's amazing power and love.

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Seventh Message

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