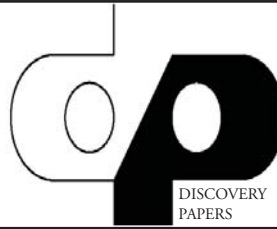




## BREAKFAST ON THE BEACH



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John 21:1-14  
40th Message  
Scott Grant  
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I have a vivid memory of the last time I preached John 21. It was April 2001, I was looking out at a field filled with five thousand people. It was the final day of a three-day evangelistic campaign in a country that is opposed to the gospel. The first night, I preached to three thousand, asking them to identify with Mary Magdalene in John 20:1–18, and more than one hundred people came forward to accept Christ. The second night, I preached to four thousand, asking them to identify with Thomas in John 20:26–29, and even more came forward. The third night, when I preached to five thousand, I asked them to identify with Peter in John 21, but we couldn't ask them to come forward because the entire field was covered with people and there was no room in the front. Instead, we asked them to stand if they wanted to accept Christ. How many people stood I cannot say. Estimates ranged from one thousand to three thousand.

The story of Peter is no less powerful here and now. So I ask you here and now, as I asked them then and there, to identify with Peter.

Many of us wonder whether some past failure has consigned us to a certain fate. We took the easy way out. We said no when we should have said yes, or we said yes when we should have said no. We made a promise—to ourselves, to someone else, to God—and then broke it. Has such a failure, or have such failures, sealed our fate?

In the summer of 1992, I taught the Scriptures at several churches in Bulgaria. After one of the gatherings a woman approached me with a troubled look on her face. She began to tell me about something she had done. She had broken a promise to God. She couldn't bring herself to tell me what it was. "Do you think God could forgive me?" she asked. She was haunted by her failure. Are you haunted by some failure? Does some past failure dangle in your mind like a loose thread? If so, then John 21 is for you.

The narrative has two parts. The first part, John 21:1–14, addresses the question of whether Jesus loves Peter. The second part, John 21:15–23, which we'll consider next week, addresses the question of whether Peter loves Jesus.

### Going fishing, catching nothing

John 21:1–3:

**After this Jesus revealed himself again to the disciples by the Sea of Tiberias, and he revealed himself in this way. <sup>2</sup>Simon Peter, Thomas (called the Twin), Nathanael of Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two others of his disciples were together. <sup>3</sup>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.**

The scene of the gospel has shifted from Jerusalem to the Sea of Tiberias, more commonly known as the Sea of Galilee (John 6:1)—the place where Jesus first gathered his disciples (John 1:43). Seven disciples are together. Three are named: Peter, the failure (John 18:25–27); Thomas, the doubter at the end (John 20:25); and Nathanael, the doubter at the beginning (John 1:46). Nathanael and Thomas each moved through their doubt and arrived at amazing professions of faith (John 1:49, John 20:28). The loose ends have been tied up for them. For Peter, the loose thread is dangling in his mind. Just as Jesus appeared to all the disciples but came specifically for Thomas (John 20:26), John leaves the impression that in this appearance, Jesus is coming specifically for Peter. He will meet Peter in the place where they first met, the Sea of Galilee. Although they never leave Galilee in this encounter, Jesus will take Peter on a journey through their history together.

Peter announces his intention to fish. The others join Peter. The group fished through the night, the best time for fishing (Luke 5:5). Although conditions seemed favorable for catching fish, Peter, even with the help of his coworkers, still caught nothing. He tried, but he failed.

On the night that Jesus was betrayed, Peter tried, but he failed. He had told Jesus, "I will lay down my life for you," but Jesus told him, "Truly, truly I say to you, the rooster will not crow till you have denied me three times" (John 13:37–38). When Jesus' enemies came to arrest him, Peter drew a sword, but Jesus told him to put it away. Then,

when Jesus was arrested, Peter disowned him three times, whereupon a rooster crowed (John 18:10–11, 15–27). Failure is starting to become a pattern.

### A memory stirs

Jesus comes to each of us in a unique way, not simply to meet with us but to meet with us in the way that's right for each of us. Perhaps he is coming to meet with you even now, as some loose thread of failure dangles in your mind. In any event, allow Jesus, through this story, to take you on a journey through your history together.

To be haunted by a past failure does not mean you are thinking about it all the time. To be haunted by a past failure means being reminded of it from time to time. You live your life—say, you go fishing, if you're a fisherman—and something happens that reminds you of your past failure. Sometimes, a failure in the present (e.g., you fail to catch any fish) triggers the memory of the prior failure. Or, you're reading a sermon and the blasted preacher makes you remember some past failure that you'd just as soon forget!

Harold S. Kushner, perhaps best known as the author of *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, can't see the word “judgment” without remembering that he misspelled it in the finals of his elementary school spelling bee almost seventy years ago.

When the memory of failure surfaces, what do you do? What does Peter do?

### Catching a miracle

John 21:4–8:

**Just as day was breaking, Jesus stood on the shore; yet the disciples did not know that it was Jesus. <sup>5</sup>Jesus said to them, “Children, do you have any fish?” They answered him, “No.” <sup>6</sup>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. <sup>7</sup>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. <sup>8</sup>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.**

The risen Lord Jesus inserts himself into this scene. Early in the morning, while the disciples are still on the lake, Jesus stands on the beach. Just like Mary Magdalene, they don't recognize him (John 20:15). It may still be dark, just as it was when Mary came to the tomb in the early morning (John 20:1). Moreover, Jesus, having been resurrected, has a new kind of body, so he's not as easily recognizable.

Jesus calls the disciples “children”—an affectionate term that also conveys the sense of undeveloped understanding. Jesus cares for and instructs Peter and the disciples as a father cares for and instructs his children. He asks them if they've caught any fish. Jesus doesn't ask the question because he doesn't know the answer; he asks the question because the disciples, particularly Peter, need to answer the question. How do you think Peter feels about being asked this question? The last thing a fisherman who hasn't caught any fish wants to be asked is if he's caught any fish! (I speak from experience here.) He has to admit failure. Peter and the others, though, answer the question: they admit failure. Ah, Peter failed before, right, when he disowned Jesus? He needs to admit it.

Although a fisherman doesn't like admitting that he hasn't caught any fish, once he admits his failure (I speak from experience here), he might be open to a few tips. Jesus instructs the men to “cast” the net on the right side of the boat in order to find a catch. Jesus used the same word when he invited Thomas to “put” (literally “cast”) his hand into the side of Jesus (John 20:27). That was the moment of enlightenment for Thomas. The men cast, and they find a huge catch.

John, one of the sons of Zebedee (John 21:2, Matthew 4:21), calling himself the “disciple whom Jesus loved,” recognizes Jesus, perhaps because the amazing catch of fish recalls the time that Jesus multiplied the loaves and fish (John 6:4–14). When John was paired with Peter at the tomb, he was the first to believe in the resurrection (John 20:8). Paired with Peter again, he says to him, “It is the Lord.” John seems to be quicker to believe, Peter quicker to act. Peter entered the tomb before John (John 20:6); now Peter enters the lake. Jesus had told the disciples to “cast” the net in order to “find” a catch. Thomas “cast” his hand into the side of Jesus, and he found Jesus in a new way. Peter casts himself into the sea to find Jesus. Jesus came on the sea to meet his disciples (John 6:19) and later “wrapped” a towel around his waist, as a slave, to wash their feet (John 13:4); now Peter comes on the sea and wraps his outer garment around himself to meet Jesus.

After Jesus multiplied the loaves and fish, the multitudes

literally got into “small boats” to seek Jesus (John 6:24). Now, his disciples do the same, literally getting into a “small boat” while dragging the net of fish with them.

### Cast yourself toward Jesus

One of Jesus’ preferred times for showing up in our lives is in the aftermath of failure, because we’re more prepared to meet with him at such times. When we fail, we’re more likely to recognize our need and we’re more likely to be open to whatever help Jesus would offer us. Sometimes, when we fail, Jesus calls to us from the shore, so to speak. At first, like Peter, you might not recognize him. You’re a child, after all: you lack understanding. But you’re a child: you’re loved by Jesus, who cares for you as a father cares for his child.

I expect my children to fail. They’re great kids, but I know they’re not perfect. It therefore does not bother me so much when they fail, even if when they do something that they know—or should know—is wrong. No, what bothers me is when they don’t admit that they did something wrong. Jesus, who considers you his child, expects you to fail. Admit your failure. Don’t make excuses for it; simply admit it. Then be open to whatever help Jesus may offer you, even if it comes from a stranger on the shore, so to speak.

And how do you recognize the presence of Jesus in your life, anyway? Sometimes, it takes another pair of eyes to see and another voice to say, “It is the Lord!” In any event, when you become aware of Jesus, what should you do? Do exactly what Peter did: cast yourself toward him. When Jesus comes to us, we must come to Jesus.

What happens when you cast yourself toward Jesus? What happens to Peter?

### The failure and the miracle

John 21:9–14:

**When they got out on land, they saw a charcoal fire in place, with fish laid out on it, and bread. <sup>10</sup>Jesus said to them, “Bring some of the fish that you have just caught.” <sup>11</sup>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. <sup>12</sup>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. <sup>13</sup>Jesus came**

**and took the bread and gave it to them, and so with the fish. <sup>14</sup>This was now the third time that Jesus was revealed to the disciples after he was raised from the dead.**

John says the disciples see a “charcoal fire.” Why would he be so specific in defining what they see? What does a charcoal fire have to do with this scene? John used these words (actually, it’s one word in biblical Greek) in one other scene in his gospel. When Peter disowned Jesus, Peter was standing near a “charcoal fire” (John 18:18). For Peter, the charcoal fire marked the scene of his failure. Now Jesus is cooking Peter’s breakfast over a charcoal fire. Fish and bread are waiting for him. Fish and bread? Again, the scene is evocative of the feeding of the five thousand, when Jesus multiplied fish and bread. The number of the fish, 153, is mentioned to not only authenticate the story but to point out the improbability of a net holding such a large number of fish without being torn.

Jesus then extends an invitation to his children: “Come and have breakfast.” This is a reminder of past meals they’ve shared together, which have been partial fulfillments of the predicted messianic feast (Isaiah 25:6), the complete fulfillment of which awaits the “marriage of the Lamb” (Revelation 19:7). By now, with all these “déjà vu” experiences, all the disciples know it’s the Lord who is extending this invitation.

John captures even more echoes of the feeding of the five thousand in his description of what takes place next. He says, “Jesus came and took the bread and gave it to them, and so with the fish.” John 6:11 reads, “Jesus then took the loaves, and when he had given thanks, he distributed them to those who were seated. So also the fish, as much as they wanted.” The feeding of the five thousand is replayed for the seven—and for the one: Peter.

John says this is the third time that Jesus appeared to his disciples after his resurrection. He appeared to the disciples first when Thomas wasn’t there (John 20:19–23) and second when Thomas was present (John 20:24–29). The number “three” will play a key role in part two of the narrative, John 21:15–25.

Peter’s failure to catch any fish is reminiscent of his failure to live up to his promise to lay down his life for Jesus. Then the charcoal fire takes him right back to the scene of his failure. Jesus turns both failures upside down.

First, Jesus turns a catch of zero fish into a catch of 153. On his own, Peter caught “nothing.” This takes Peter back to Jesus’ farewell discourse, where Jesus told him and

the other disciples, “I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing” (John 15:5). Apart from Jesus, Peter caught nothing. With Jesus calling the shots from the shore, Peter caught a miracle.

Second, Jesus turns the burning agony of failure into the warm glow of fellowship. The place that Peter failed—the charcoal fire—is the place from which Jesus nourishes Peter. John leaves no doubt that Peter is feeding on more than bread and fish. John has already told us that Jesus, in the wake of the feeding of the five thousand, said, “I am the bread of life” (John 6:48). In a sense, Peter is feeding on fellowship with Jesus in the same place that he failed Jesus. The place of Peter’s brokenness is the place where Jesus breaks bread with him. Jesus goes to the place of Peter’s failure and shares a meal with him there.

John picks up these two strands from Peter’s past—the miracle and the failure—and weaves them together into Peter’s present. The miracle is for Peter, too. He too is to feed on the Bread of Life. To assure Peter that his failure doesn’t disqualify him from partaking of the feast, Jesus feeds him from the place of his failure.

Does Jesus love Peter? What do you think? Does Jesus love you? What do you think?

### **Breaking bread in a broken place**

Our failures should remind us that apart from Jesus we can do nothing. With Jesus, we still might do nothing, at least from our perspective, but at least we’re doing nothing with Jesus, which means we’re doing something. Anything we do with Jesus is meaningful and contributes to our spiritual formation.

Is there a charcoal fire in your life that still burns in your memory? Did you take the easy way out? Did you say no when you should have said yes, or did you say yes when you should have said no? Did you break a promise?

If the memory of a failure surfaces, Jesus is waiting to meet you in that memory. There, in your memory, Jesus wants you not simply to remember your failure; he also wants you to remember the good times, just as he wanted Peter to remember the feeding of the five thousand. It wasn’t all bad. It probably wasn’t even mostly bad. It was probably mostly good. Failure is only part of your story; it isn’t your whole story. Have there not been moments in your life or seasons when Jesus was working in a powerful, noticeable way, even if you didn’t notice him then? Perhaps you notice him now. David, in distress, writes, “I

remember the days of old; / I meditate on all that you have done; / I ponder the work of your hands” (Psalm 143:5). Has there been something akin to the feeding of the five thousand in your life, some moment or season in which his presence was noticeable? Remember it. Meditate on it. Muse on it.

Now, what does Jesus want to do with these two memories: the failure and the epiphany? He doesn’t run from your failure. No, he visits you in your failure. In fact, he’s waiting for you there. He’s waiting for you to cast yourself toward him and join him on the beach, so to speak. He doesn’t want to beat you up with your failure. He doesn’t want to lecture you. He doesn’t want to say “I told you so.” He just wants to share a meal with you. He wants to break bread with you in the place that you’re broken. There, in the place of your failure, Jesus offers you the Bread of Life. He offers you himself. After all, his body was broken for such a time as this. In partaking of him, you feast on love and forgiveness and fellowship. The place of failure, then, becomes the place of deep and restorative fellowship with him.

If you meet with Jesus in this way, he’ll give you a new memory, the memory of how he met you in your failure. Do you think that Peter ever forgot the breakfast he shared on the beach with Jesus? What’s the result? What does Jesus do with these two memories: the failure and the epiphany? He transforms the failure into a new epiphany! Thus, we are no longer haunted by the failure. The “charcoal fire” no longer burns your conscience with memories of failure but instead warms your heart with the poetic love of Jesus. He heals our memories. Perhaps even now, through this story, Jesus is meeting with you, and today will become a new memory. He not only heals our memories, he also transforms them. That loose thread of failure that’s dangling in your mind? Jesus ties it up.

In 2010, I attended the memorial service for Charlie Wedemeyer, the longtime football coach of Los Gatos High School who continued coaching even as ALS ravaged his body, depriving him of virtually all movement. Many dignitaries spoke at the service, including Steve Mariucci, the former coach of the San Francisco 49ers, and the Hollywood actor who played Charlie in a made-for-TV movie. I don’t remember what they said. However, I do remember a story that Charlie’s adult son, Kale, shared. When Charlie was still healthy and Kale was a boy, Kale misbehaved in a grievous manner. Charlie administered the appropriate discipline. When he was convinced that his son understood the consequences for his misdeed, Charlie said to Kale, “Now, come over and give your daddy a kiss.” And Jesus says to us, as a father to a child, “Come and have

breakfast.” Imagine yourself sharing a meal with Jesus in the same place that you failed him.

### **The table is set**

When the woman in Bulgaria asked me if God could forgive her for breaking her promise to him, I began to respond to her. “Do you remember Peter?” I asked her. At that, before I could say another word, she interrupted me by grabbing my arm. She froze, and looked at me with the astonished joy of someone who had just been reprieved from a death sentence. I didn’t say another word, and neither did she. She remembered the story of Peter, and that’s all she needed to do. Remember your failure. But, remember your epiphany. And, remember the story of Peter.

Will you let him love you there? John has shown us that in the resurrection of Jesus, a new creation has dawned, with Jesus breathing the Holy Spirit into the disciples on the first day of the week just as God breathed life into the first man. Peter, though, has been living in the darkness of the old creation, unsure of what everything means.

It is a new day. It is time to forget about broken promises and crowing roosters and the betrayals of the night. Dawn is breaking, and Jesus is standing on the shore. The charcoal fire is burning, and the fish have been laid on it. The bread is warm. The table is set. “Come and have breakfast.”

### **NOTES**

1 Parade Magazine (September 8, 1996), 8.