

### Introduction:

I've made some awful mistakes in my life; many before I became a Christian and many after, many before I got married and many after, many before I became a preacher and many after. I wish I could say I made each mistake only once, but most of them have been made repeatedly. Some of them I have overcome completely. Some of them are a daily battle but I have consistently overcome. Some of them are just a continual struggle. The war is on and while, through Jesus, I believe I'm winning the war, there are still a lot of lost battles. Do you know what I'm talking about?

One great source of comfort for me is knowing I'm not alone. I've talked with lots of Christians who express the exact same feelings. Furthermore, I can turn to the Bible and find the exact same story even among those who were righteous. Noah got drunk. Abraham lied and struggled with his faith. Sarah laughed at God. Moses took the glory to himself and struck the rock. David lusted, committed adultery, and murdered. Paul coveted. Timothy doubted. Peter denied Jesus.

Let's stop there and think about that for a moment. Peter denied Jesus. However, this denial didn't come in a vacuum. Earlier that same night, Peter had stepped out in front of his colleagues, accused them all of being weakly cowards and proclaimed that he alone would stand with Jesus, arguing with Jesus' own prophecy on the matter (**Matthew 26:30-35**). "I'll die with you, Jesus. Everyone else will fall away, but your prophecy doesn't include me. I don't care what You say; I'll never fall away." And he lived up to that statement as long as things were going his way. Keep in mind, Peter was the one who pulled out a sword and attacked the cohort of soldiers and priests who came to arrest Jesus (**John 18:10**). As long as Peter thought this was going to be a fight, he wasn't about to fall away because of Jesus. As long as Peter thought his potential death would be on his terms in a brutal fight through which he might take down some of the enemy, he wasn't about to fall away. But when Jesus demonstrated this wasn't going to be a fight but surrender, Peter was lost in utter confusion. When the test came to stand up not for Jesus the fighting and victorious Messiah, but to surrender alongside Jesus the condemned prisoner, he faltered. Not once, not twice, but three times he denied Jesus, finally enforcing his words with oaths and swearing (**Luke 22:54-62**). The telltale rooster crowed and Jesus turned to look at Peter. Can you imagine Peter in that moment? Have you been there? Do you know that feeling of having gone back on your commitments to God? Have you ever sworn to God that you wouldn't do it again, but then you did? Have you ever faced the rooster's crow and felt the mournful gaze of God as He looked directly at you in your sin?

How do you overcome that? How do you put your hand back in His after you've slapped His face with it? How do you look Him in the eyes again and accept even His love after seeing the gaze that sparked such intense guilt and shame?

For me, the comfort doesn't end with seeing how others have mirrored my mistakes and falls. The comfort really comes home when I see that others have overcome and returned to the fold of the faithful. I am comforted knowing that if they can mirror my fall, I can mirror their return. Peter's story doesn't end with him weeping bitterly. It continues in **John 21**. This chapter provides nine vital lessons for overcoming our mistakes and gaining victory in Jesus.

### Discussion:

- I. Come face to face with your sin.
  - A. As much as we may want to, we can't come back into fellowship with God by sweeping our sin under the rug. God won't do that. He didn't do it with Peter.
  - B. If we are not careful, we may miss the careful construction of this reconciliation story. **John 21:9** says this story with Jesus takes place around a charcoal fire. Interestingly, fire is mentioned all over the New Testament. However, the particular word used for "charcoal fire" in **John 21:9** is only used in one other place—**John 18:18**. Jesus was talking to Peter over the exact same kind of fire over which Peter denied Him. Peter had demonstrated lack of love for Jesus by denying Him three times. How many times does Jesus ask Peter, "Do you love me?" Three times. Three times Jesus reminded Peter of his failure to live up to his commitment. Three times Jesus made Peter face his sin. Before he could be in full fellowship with Jesus, fully equipped to do the work Jesus had for him, he had to face his sin.

C. No, God won't sweep our sins under the rug. He loves us too much to let that happen. A sin swept under the rug always needles us. It is the skeleton in the closet that we are always afraid will jump out at the wrong moment. It is the closed door in the house of our heart that keeps God from having all of us and therefore keeps us from having all of Him. He doesn't make us come face to face with our sins out of vengeance or spite. He doesn't do it simply to say, "See, I told you so." He doesn't do it to rub it in our faces. He does it to let us know that He has come face to face with our sin and loves us anyway, now it's our turn.

## II. Draw near to Jesus; don't run from Him.

A. Earlier in the chapter, we see an interesting occurrence. In **John 21:3-6**, we experience some déjà vu. The disciples are out fishing all night, but have caught nothing. Then along comes Jesus who says, "Cast your net on the other side of the boat." They did and the fish come pouring in. This exact same thing had happened in **Luke 5:4-7**. Do you remember how Peter responded in **Luke 5:8**. "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord." No doubt, there is some healthy humility in Peter's early statement. There is some recognition of sin and unworthiness that we all need to have. Jesus responded then, "Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching men." Peter asked Jesus to depart but Jesus refused; He drew Peter closer.

B. However, in this second scenario, the one after Peter has committed perhaps the most heinous sin of his life, not once but three times, Peter's response is completely different. I have no doubt he felt the humility. I have no doubt he felt the guilt. I have no doubt he felt the shame. But when he discovered this man was Jesus, he didn't seek to be separated from Him. He couldn't wait to get near Him. He quickly put all his clothes back on and jumped in the water to swim for Jesus (**John 21:7**). He couldn't wait for the others to row the boat to shore. He swam to Jesus.

C. I'm sure Peter still had some issues, some reservations, some concerns, but he demonstrates the great desire we must all have if we want to overcome our mistakes. We have to want to be close to Jesus; we have to want to get close to God. If we don't want to be near God, we won't ever overcome our mistakes. We won't ever restore that fellowship fully. Oh, we might linger on the fringes, coming to church, dabbling in religion, but we'll never have a relationship with God.

## III. Love Jesus.

A. As Jesus drew Peter in, causing him to look directly at his sin, Jesus highlighted the most important part of overcoming our mistakes. "Do you love me?" He asked (**John 21:15, 16, 17**). Peter responded, "Yes, you know I love you." Peter needed to love Jesus. Peter wasn't supposed to feed Jesus' sheep because it was the rule. He wasn't supposed to obey Jesus to earn heaven. He wasn't supposed to live for Jesus to impress everyone else. He was to live based on love.

B. Think about your relationship with your spouse for a moment. How do you think your wife or husband would feel if the only reason you did anything for them was because it was the rule? Or what if you only did stuff for your spouse to get your spouse to do things for you? What kind of relationship does that produce in a home? A connected one? A close one? An intimate one? Or a disconnected, independent, miserable one that is just about going through motions to look good before everyone else? In our marriages we need to do whatever we do because we love our spouse and that's it. How much more should we recognize the same thing in our walk with God? Are we only serving Him so He'll give us heaven? Are we only serving Him because it has been proven to be on His checklist of rules? Or are we serving Him because we love Him?

C. We need to love Jesus. If we don't love Jesus, we won't overcome our mistakes. The only way to overcome our sins is to begin with a love that comes from a pure heart, good conscience, and sincere faith (**I Timothy 1:5**). **Matthew 22:37** says the greatest command is to love God with all our heart, soul, and mind. That needs to be the basis for our action. Our goal today should be to do everything we do because we love God. When that becomes our basis, then everything else falls into place. If you have trouble loving Jesus, just remember **I John 4:19**. He loved us first. Take some time everyday to remind yourself how much Jesus loved you and how He showed it.

## IV. Do the work the Lord has given you.

A. Jesus had a job for Peter. "Feed my sheep" (**John 21:17**). It was not enough for Peter to simply say he loved Jesus. He needed to demonstrate his love by doing what Jesus said.

- B. Far too often, we never overcome our sins because all we think about is what we aren't supposed to do. One of the best ways to overcome sin is to start figuring out what we are supposed to do and get busy doing it. For instance, if you consider the contrasts found in **Ephesians 4:25-32**. If I'm working hard to tell the truth, I don't have time to lie. If I quickly deal with my anger, I don't give the devil room in my life. If I spend the large portion of my day working to gain what I need, I won't have time to steal. If my plan is to say only good things, there will be no place in my mouth for corrupting things. If I'm spending my time being kind, tender-hearted, compassionate, and forgiving, I don't have time to pursue malice, wrath, bitterness, and resentment.
- C. **Matthew 6:33** says we need to first, that is primarily, pursue God's rule and righteousness in our lives. One of the most succinct ways I've heard this put is the phrase I picked up somewhere: "Do the next right thing." What is it that God wants me to do next? If I do that, then I won't pursue my sins. I'll overcome.

V. Get outside yourself and serve others.

- A. I can't help but notice that when Jesus gave Peter a work, that work had to do with others. The work was not, "Peter, increase your faith so you'll pass the test next time." The work was not, "Peter, learn My will." The work was not, "Peter, become stronger and more mature." The work was, "Feed my sheep" (**John 21:17**). Don't misunderstand, if Peter were going to be able to feed the sheep, he would become more mature, learn Jesus' will, and increase his faith. But the heart of Christ's work for Peter was to get out of himself and serve others.
- B. The story is told of a mountain man caught in a freak snowstorm while he was hunting. He tried to make his way home in the blinding snow. The temperature was dropping too fast. He knew if he could just make it home, a fire was waiting. If he stayed out too long in the dropping temperature, hypothermia would set in. His extremities would get stiff and start to freeze, his heart would slow, he would fall asleep and never wake up. As he walked through the woods he did everything he could think of to create warmth. He jumped up and down. He flapped his arms. He tried to run. But the trek was taking too long. He started to slow down. He was having trouble lifting his feet and missing the roots. He stumbled several times. Each time it was harder to get back up. It would be easier just to lie there. One last time, his foot caught and he fell forward. But something was wrong. This was no tree branch. This was a person. The discovery shocked a little more life into him and he dusted the snow off to discover it was his best friend who must have also been caught in this freak act of nature. No matter what happened to him, he couldn't let his friend die. He took off his gloves and began to rub the man's hands and face. He reached up under the man's coat and shirt and began to rub vigorously on his chest and then his back. An amazing thing happened; not only did the friend revive but the hunter began to warm up. The same friction that was helping his friend was helping him.
- C. If we really want to overcome our sins, we need to start serving and helping others. There is nothing that will strengthen us like striving to strengthen others. The problem for us is we often treat serving as if it is just another checklist burden we have to bear as Christians. That is not the case at all. Service is an opportunity God has given us to help us grow and overcome.

VI. Sacrifice yourself to Jesus.

- A. In **John 21:18-19**, Jesus makes a shocking statement. He tells Peter about his death. The day will come when Peter will die for Jesus. His hands will be stretched out, just as Jesus' hands were. Peter was going to die by crucifixion as did His master. I want you to think for just a moment about what this meant. Jesus wasn't calling Peter to give some. He was calling Peter to give all. He was saying, "Peter, if you love me, devote your life to others. If you do that, you'll get to be crucified for me." Jesus called Peter to sacrifice himself for Jesus. But the sacrifice didn't begin when he was crucified. The sacrifice was going to begin in the moment Jesus was talking to Him. He concluded with, "Follow me."
- B. I can't help but think of **Romans 12:1** that calls us to be living sacrifices. I also think of **Galatians 2:20** that says we are to be crucified with Jesus. What plans had Peter had as a fisherman? Jesus was calling Peter to put those plans aside and surrender them to Him.
- C. This is, of course, a real struggle for us, at least it is for me. I struggle with fully sacrificing myself to Jesus and just surrendering to His will. What if His plans for me don't coincide with my

plans for me? I have things I would like to be and do. I want to be a great writer, read far and wide, helping people I never meet because they read my blogs and books. But what if God's plans for me are different? What if he wants me to play a different role? What if He wants me to live and die in obscurity, helping only a few people close by? This is where we struggle. But the point we need to understand is that God's way works. When I've tried to run my life by my own plans, I always fail. I always fall back into sin. I have to learn that only God's way really works. That is why we need to sacrifice ourselves for Him. That is why we need to surrender to Him and to His will. Our way leads to death (**Proverbs 14:12; 16:25**). God's way leads to life (**Matthew 7:13-14**).

#### VII. Rely on the Lord's strength.

- A. We need to look again at the story that prepared the way for Peter's reconciliation. Jesus let something happen that would prepare Peter to accept this challenge. In **John 21:3**, Peter decided, "I'm going fishing." What else was there to do? That was what he knew. He had been raised a fisherman. Fishing was his element. Fishing was where he felt strong. Fishing was where he was in control. He naturally gravitated back to that because it was what he understood. Or so he thought.
- B. There he was in his element, doing what he knew best, doing what he was trained from childhood for. But it wasn't working. Try as hard as he might, he couldn't catch a fish. Persist and persevere as much as he could, he couldn't catch a fish. For all his strength, for all his know how, for all his prowess, for all his control, he couldn't bring in one little fish. Enter Jesus. "Cast your nets on the other side" (**John 21:6**). Suddenly they had so many fish they could hardly haul it in. What is the lesson to be learned from this? Peter couldn't do what he thought he had most control over on his own. He needed Jesus to even catch fish. What would that mean for overcoming his sins, fishing for men, and feeding sheep? If he thought he was powerful enough to do it, he would always come up empty handed. He would always fail.
- C. Sadly, so many of us squander our lives in sin because we are trying to prove how strong we are. We want to come to God saying, "Look at me, I'm perfect. Let me in, You owe me." We work so hard at presenting the image of great spiritual strength and perfection that we even blind ourselves to our own sinfulness. If we want to overcome, we have to learn some poverty of spirit (**Matthew 5:3**). We need to come to God saying, "Look at me, I'm pathetic. Take me in, I need You to fix me." We should face every day, every decision, every deed with this prayer, "God without You, I won't be able to do this." We will only be able to overcome our sin, if we quit trying to overcome on our own. It is when we see how weak we are and start relying on God that His strength will work through us (**II Corinthians 12:9-10; Ephesians 3:14-21**).

#### VIII. Clean up your own side of the street.

- A. Peter, as was his usual self, got distracted from Jesus in this story. He looked around and saw John, that is, the one who is traditionally recognized as the disciple whom Jesus loved. "Lord, what about this man?" (**John 21:21**). I think we can understand this. Peter is going through an incredibly emotional ordeal here. He wants to get Jesus' gaze off of him and start focusing it on someone else. So he asks, "What about John? What do you have in store for him? How is he supposed to serve you? How is he going to die? Is he going to be martyred too?"
- B. Jesus refused to answer his question. His response was, "That's none of your business. Your job is to do my will for you" (cf. **John 21:22**). While we do need to get outside ourselves and serve others, we don't need to get bogged down in running everybody else's lives. As the saying goes, we need to clean up our side of the street. We don't need to take everyone else's inventory. We don't need to spend our time trying to fix everybody else. We need to spend our time doing what Jesus has asked of us. Now don't misunderstand, this doesn't mean we don't teach and encourage others, this doesn't mean we don't bear one another's burdens. After all, John would be one of Jesus' sheep that Peter was supposed to feed. The point is that no matter what others do or what Jesus has planned for others, our job is to do our job. Jesus may plan blessings for others that we don't get. If we get sidetracked wanting to know how their blessings compare to ours, we're going to fall back into sin. Instead, we simply need to clean up our side of the street. We need to follow Jesus and live His will for us.

IX. In Jesus, you will be victorious.

- A. The final key to overcoming our sins and having victory in Jesus is often missed because we are so shocked that Jesus tells Peter how he is going to die. What on earth did Jesus think He was accomplishing by tacking on, “Oh, by the way Peter, when your life of feeding and serving my sheep is over, you’re going to get crucified”?
- B. Understand why this exchange is important. In **Matthew 26:30-35**, Peter had stood up before the other apostles and brashly proclaimed though the others would fall away, he never would. If he even had to die for Jesus, he would do that instead of fall away. But when put to the test, he failed. He didn’t live up to his commitment. When the opportunity arose to die with Jesus as he promised, he denied Jesus. I don’t know exactly how Peter felt in this moment. I do know how I would have felt. I would have felt like a failure. I would have felt that for all the great things I might do, I had failed the ultimate test. I would be unsure that I would ever pass that test. I might proudly proclaim how much I love Jesus, but when pushed again will I resort to failure. I just wouldn’t be sure I could ever overcome. Add to that the fact that Jesus had just questioned Him three times on whether or not he really loved Him. At the end of that questioning, I would be wondering if Jesus has any faith in me or if He thinks I’m a failure.
- C. But Jesus puts that potential fear to rest by telling Peter about the death he would die. It is not a weird, out of left field comment, leaving us wondering what on earth Jesus was doing. It makes perfect sense. Jesus comforts Peter by pointing out that the day will come when Peter really will make that ultimate sacrifice. The day will come when he really will live up to that promise. The day really will come when he will ultimately overcome that sin because he will be put to the test and he will pass. In Jesus is victory. No matter what we’ve done, no matter how far we’ve gone, no matter what mistakes and sins have plagued us, if we love Jesus, relying on His strength to accomplish the work He has given us, we will be victorious.
- D. Don’t you know that picture was a comfort to Peter? Every time he messed up after this, and he did mess up, he could remember that Jesus Himself had said he was going to come around. He was going to grow. He was going to overcome. He was going to be victorious. Maybe today another mess was made. But instead of turning his back on Jesus thinking he would never make it, he could come back to Him again and in the end, Jesus would make him victorious.
- E. Isn’t that God’s promise to us in **Romans 8:28-30**? If we love Him, He has promised us victory. We may have messed things up again. But if we love Him, He’ll work even that out for our good as He works to conform us to the image of His Son that we may be justified and glorified. Isn’t this the promise of **Philippians 2:12-13**, as Paul explains that we can keep working on our salvation because God is the one working in us? If you want to overcome, have faith in God’s promise. If you love Him, He will bring you victory. If you love Him, He will cause you to overcome. When we have this faith, we can say along with Paul in **Romans 7:24-25**, “Who will deliver me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!”

**Conclusion:**

Brothers and sisters, if you are like me, you are plagued by mistakes and sins. Sometimes you wonder whether you should even keep trying. The answer is, “Yes; you should.” Why? Because there is victory in Jesus. That is the only place there is victory. If you walk away because you’ve made too many mistakes, you will not overcome. You will not have victory. But, if you keep holding on to Jesus, loving Him, relying on Him, you will have victory; you will overcome.