

While I have been reading the Bible for as long as I can remember, I am continually amazed by the fact that every day that I pick it up, I find something new; God through His Spirit continues to reveal new insights to me and to show me how to apply His Word to the demands and problems of everyday life.

While the Bible to me is one continuous story of God's love for us, it is also full of individual stories of God reaching out to different people in love throughout history. So this morning let's look at several of these stories, some of which you may be familiar with, and see how God touched and changed the lives of ordinary people just like you and me. Let's start with one of my favorite biblical characters – Simon Peter. You just have to love Peter. He represents both the strengths and the weaknesses of all human beings. He was a born leader, hard worker, and faithful. Yet he was also hard headed, prone to jump into action without thinking first, and said whatever came to his mind. He suffered like a lot of us from foot and mouth disease; you know, open mouth, insert foot.

With Peter, what you saw was what you got. He was a man's man. I always thought that John Wayne would have been the best actor to play Peter in a movie. But with all his faults, he loved the Lord. In a way, he was loyal to a fault. Remember that on the night that Jesus was arrested He shared the Lord's Supper with His disciples. Sometime during the meal, Peter boldly proclaimed that he would die for Jesus. He even went so far as to indicate that he didn't know about the rest of the guys, but he would be there for Jesus when He needed him no matter how tough the going got. Of course, Jesus saw right through all this bragging, and told Peter that before the night was over, he would deny knowing Jesus not once, but three times.

All four Gospels record what happens next. This morning, I want to focus on Luke's account as found in the 22th chapter, verses 54-62, because it provides an insight that the other three gospels do not.

Read Luke 22:54-62

At supper, Peter swears that he will never abandon Jesus, but guess what happens when the soldiers come to the garden to arrest Jesus. When the going gets tough, Peter runs away with the rest of the disciples, probably leading the pack! Yet, the Bible tells us that he and John followed Jesus, but they followed at a distance. That term "at a distance" can describe a lot of our relationships with Jesus. We like to keep Jesus at a safe distance; we don't want to get too close; He might just rub off on us and change us. And that scares us. But fortunately as you follow the story, Peter did not remain at a distance.

As predicted Peter denied knowing Jesus not once, but three times that night. He abandoned Jesus in His hour of greatest need. I like Luke's account because he has one interesting insight. Verse 61 states that after the rooster crowed, "The Lord turned and looked at Peter." Jesus looked straight at Peter, indicating that their eyes met. Can you imagine the look in Jesus' eyes? Try to picture in your mind how it must have felt to Peter. It must have been like a dagger to Peter's heart. He had failed the one person that he loved the most. Luke tells us that Peter ran away and wept. The man's man goes and cries his heart out over his failure and disappointment to the Lord.

But what was Jesus' reaction? That's our message for this morning. Was it hurt? Disappointment? Anger? Or was it that famous old line that many of us men have heard before - "I told you so"? You know - those famous words from our loved one: "I told you we were lost, you should have asked for directions;" "I told you to read the instructions before you started putting it together;" "I told you to get gas in Vaughn;" or "I told you to call the plumber and not try and fix it yourself." I had a pastor in Georgia who often said that "He hated it when God spoke to him through his wife."

But this was not Jesus' way. In the Gospel of Mark on Easter morning, the angel tells the women who had come to the tomb to go and tell Jesus' disciples and **Peter** that He was going ahead of them to Galilee. Jesus singled out Peter for a reason and that reason is found in the 21st chapter of the Gospel of John, verses 15-17. Still trying to understand the Resurrection and what to do, some of the disciples had gone fishing. Like me when I go fishing, they didn't catch anything. As they headed back to shore they see Jesus cooking breakfast.

After breakfast, Jesus takes Peter aside, and restores him in private with love, compassion, and gentleness. Isn't it interesting that one of the first persons that Jesus appears to after the Resurrection is the very one who had denied knowing Him? The normal human reaction is to be bitter or mad, but there is no rebuke or I told you so. However, out of love, Jesus gives Peter back his self-respect and confidence, showing him that He still trusts and needs him. Jesus treated Peter with the love that Paul described in 1 Corinthians 13: "Love is patient, love is kind; it is not rude; it is not easily angered; and most importantly, it keeps no record of wrong."

Why did Jesus do this? Well, one reason is that Jesus saw great potential in Peter. He saw unlimited possibilities in this headstrong fisherman from Galilee. From the first time He met him, Jesus had been grooming Peter for greater things. In Matthew 16:18, Jesus tells Peter: "Upon this rock I will build my church." It is the love of Jesus that sees the hero even in the coward. Jesus not only sees who we are, but also what we can become if we allow Him to have control over our lives.

Here on the shores of the Sea of Galilee, Jesus gave Peter a second chance. Think about it. What would have happened if Jesus had rebuked Peter, and made him feel worse than he already did about denying the Lord? Peter might have gone back to his previous occupation of fishing and been a second rate fisherman. Instead, with a second chance, Peter goes on to become a leader of the Early Church, the great apostle, and a fisher of men.

The Bible is full of stories of God giving ordinary men and women like you and me a second chance at life, and they went on and changed the course of history. As you read the Old Testament, you find stories about how the Israelites rejected God over and over, got into trouble, called out to God for help, and God saved them and gave them a second chance, not once but numerous times. Then there is the great prophet Elijah who throws the classic pity party and asks God to take his life. Instead, God gives him an assistant Elisha and then gives him a ride to heaven on a fiery chariot.

And what about Jonah, the reluctant prophet who runs from the task God has given him and becomes fish bait, spending three nights in the stomach of a big fish. But God did not disown him. When given a second chance, Jonah goes on to fulfill his task all the wiser from his experience. And then there's the beloved King David who commits adultery with Bathsheba and yet God gives him a legacy that includes Jesus Christ Himself as a descendent. Over and over again God gives those who repent and ask for His help a second chance.

Of course, these stories of second chances are not restricted to the Old Testament, and to Peter. Take Paul for example. He was originally called Saul the Pharisee who led the persecution of the Christians in the Early Church. But one day on the road to Damascus, he met Jesus Christ and received a second chance to discover what a real relationship with God was like. He gets a new name - Paul, and turns from killing Christians to become their leader, the great apostle, and writes some of the most insightful letters in the New Testament. Think of the difference that Paul made due to the second chance that God gave him.

Now these second chances are not restricted to saints and religious leaders; it's for everybody who calls on the Lord. For instance, there's the thief on the cross beside Jesus on Good Friday. Listen to the conversation between him and Jesus that day from the 23rd chapter of Luke: "One of the criminals who hung there, hurled insults at Jesus: 'Aren't you the Messiah? Save yourself and us!'" But the other criminal rebuked him. "Don't you fear God," he said, "since you are under the same sentence? We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong." Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into Your kingdom." Jesus answered him, "I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in Paradise."

There are many legends about this thief who asks for Jesus' forgiveness. William Barclay, the great Scottish Theologian, relates that his name was Demas and that he was sort of the Robin Hood in Judea at this time; who robbed from the rich and gave to the poor. One **legend** tells that when Joseph and Mary were fleeing from Bethlehem to Egypt with the baby Jesus, they were attacked by robbers who planned to kill them. However, they were saved by the son of the captain of the robber band. The baby Jesus was so lovely that the young man could not lay a hand on him, instead he set him free saying: "O blessed of children, if there ever comes a time for having mercy on me, then remember me and forget not this hour." That young thief who saved Jesus as a baby met Him again on the cross at Calvary, and this time Jesus saved him.

This story tells us that it is never too late to turn to Jesus. The sad part is that the thief waited until he was dying for his second chance. But, but Jesus still gave it to him. Have you ever thought of the cross as a sign of a second chance? Second chance for you and for me; and really for the world. God gave us, the human race, a second chance through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. It is clearly stated in those well-known verses of John 3:16-17: "For God so loved the world that He gave His only Begotten Son that whosoever believeth in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God sent not His Son into the world to condemn it, but that the world through Him might be saved."

When people come into a strange town or are in trouble, where do you think they go? They go to the place with a cross on it. They know that they can find help in the cross, and a second chance. One day during communion, a little girl seeing the cross on the communion table whispered to her mother: "Mama, what is that plus sign doing on the table?" The cross is God's plus sign for each one of us. God does not want to take away anything from our lives but add to it by giving us a second chance.

Consider three points from these scripture verses that we just read. First, God is patient, and oh, how some of us try His patience! He is always there waiting for us to come to our senses, to reach out to Him and accept His love and grace that He freely gives to all. Second, God is forgiving. We need only go to Him, confess our sin or need for help, and He will cleanse and heal us. And third, God will renew and strengthen us for the task ahead. He will restore us and lift us up on wings of eagles.

Billy Graham tells the story of a boy and his mother in a market place in China. The boy sees some cherries and really wants them, but he has no money. The seller sees this and asks the boy if he would like some. The boy is shy and ducks his head. The man tells him to hold out his hands, but the little boy kept his hands by his side. The man said again: "Hold out your hands if you want some." But the boy kept his hands by his side. Finally, the man scooped up a handful and gave it to the boy. As they were walking away, his mother asked him why he didn't hold

out his hands when the nice man asked him. To which the boy replied: 'Because his hands were bigger than mine!'

His hands, God's hands are bigger than ours and all the problems that we will ever face. No matter what we do, how bad we feel, God is always there waiting with open arms to forgive and embrace us. Now I didn't hear the rooster crow like Peter did. I haven't been knocked down by lightning like Paul. I haven't been swallowed by a big fish or ridden a fiery chariot into heaven. But from being around for over 78 years, I have learned what those four guys learned from their Father in heaven. Our God is no fair-weather Father. He's not into this love-them-and leave-them stuff. I can count on Him to be there in my corner no matter what. And so can you. Won't you give God a second chance; He did as much for you.

God gave Peter a second chance; He gave Paul a second chance; He gave Jonah a second chance; and He is willing to give you and me a second chance. Every day, God gives us a second chance; a second chance to grow spiritually, to become the person that He wants us to be, to live the abundant life He has promised us. Please take advantage of this second chance.

Someone has said that if there are 1000 steps between you and God, God will take 999, but you have to take the last one. Will you take that step? God wants to give you that chance to make life worth living. Please take Him up on His offer. You will never regret it! Amen