

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 and start to read passages from it, 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.

Over the years, I have determined that the Bible is a continuous story of God's love for each one of us. I have also found that it is full of stories of God reaching out to different individuals 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 has 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, jumped into action without thinking first, and always said what was on his mind. Like some of us, he suffered 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 have 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 shared the Lord's Supper with the disciples, Peter boldly declared that he would die for Jesus. He even went so far as to proclaim that he didn't know about the rest of the disciples, but he would be there for Jesus when the going got tough. Of course, Jesus saw through all this boasting, and told Peter that before the night was over, he would deny knowing Jesus not once, but three times.

At supper, Peter swears that he will never abandon Jesus, but guess what happens when the soldiers come to the Garden of Gethsemane to arrest Jesus. When the going gets tough, Peter runs away with the rest of the disciples, probably leading the pack! Yes, 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 Him 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 Peter's story in the gospels, he did not remain at a distance.

As predicted Peter denied knowing Jesus not once, but three times. He abandoned Jesus in His hour of greatest need. Of all the Gospel accounts, I like Luke's best because in the twenty-second chapter he writes that after the third denial, "The Lord turned and 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 his heart. He had

failed the one person that he loved the most. Luke tells us that then 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 one of hurt, anger, or disappointment? Was it "I told you so"? Now some of us men have heard those words "I told you so" before. You know – those famous words from our loved ones: "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 Atlanta, 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 story of disciples' fishing trip in 21<sup>st</sup> chapter of the Gospel of John where Jesus prepares breakfast for the disciples. Listen to the conversation between Jesus and Peter following breakfast in verses 15-23.

Read John 21:15-23

Isn't interesting that one of the first persons that Jesus appears to after the Resurrection is the very one who had denied knowing Him? Notice what Jesus did. The normal human reaction is to be bitter or mad, but there is no rebuke or I told you so. After breakfast, Jesus takes Peter aside for a private conversation, and restores him with love, compassion and gentleness. He 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 states: "I tell you that you are Peter, and on 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, who 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 again, got into trouble, called out to God, and God saved them and gave them another 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 a ride on a fiery chariot to heaven.

And what about Jonah, the reluctant prophet who runs from the task God had given him and becomes fish bait, spending three nights in the belly of a big fish. Jonah missed his first chance, failed the Lord miserably, and suffered for it. But God did not disown him, but gave him a second chance and new orders. Jonah went 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. As we discussed last Sunday, he was originally called Saul the Pharisee who had the job of persecuting the Christians in the Early Church. But one day on the road to Damascus, he met Jesus Christ and received a second chance on discovering what a true relationship with God was like. He even 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 has made for Jesus because of the second chance he was given.

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 as recorded in the 23<sup>rd</sup> chapter of Luke: "One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at Jesus: "Aren't you the Christ? 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."

The story tells us that it is never too late to turn to Jesus Christ. 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 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.

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 from our lives but to add to them by giving us a second chance.

Consider three points from these stories: First, God is patient, and oh, how some of us try His patience! He is always there waiting for us 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, as we discussed last Sunday.

A little boy went to the baseball field all by himself carrying a bat and ball. With great confidence, he tossed the ball into the air and said: "I'm the greatest hitter in the world!" But he swung and missed. "Strike one," he said. He picked the ball up, looked it over and then threw it into the air again. As he watched the ball descend, he repeated: "I'm the greatest batter in the world!" But once again he missed. "Strike two," he said. With a puzzled look on his face, he stopped to examine his bat to make sure there wasn't a hole in it. A third time, he tossed the ball into the air and repeated: "I'm the greatest hitter in the world." But he missed a third time. "Strike three, you're out!" he said with the enthusiasm of an umpire. But instead of being discouraged, the boy began to jump up and down, and shout across the ball field: "Wow, what a pitch; I'm the greatest pitcher in the world." Everybody deserves a second chance!

One of my favorite verses in the Bible is 1 Corinthians 2:9 - "No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind conceived what God has prepared for those who love Him." When Jesus called him from his fishing boat, Peter had no idea what was in store for him. Neither did Paul when Christ met him on the road to Damascus. So what does He have in store for you and for me, if we give Him a chance?

Now there may be some of us who think I don't deserve a second chance. My brother felt that way for many years. He would say: "God could not love me because I've been so bad. I have done too many bad things for Him to ever forgive me." But he was wrong; through prayer and remembering what our mother had taught us, God has given him a second chance. The love of God encompasses all our sins, weaknesses, and failures. My brother sent me a note a while back that read: "Life isn't about waiting for the storm to pass. It's about learning to dance in the rain!" And through God's grace, Harry has learned and so can we that God is always waiting to give us a second chance to dance.



Billy Graham tells the story of a little 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 of cherries 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. 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 like Jonah or ridden a fiery chariot into heaven like Elijah. But after being around for 74 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. Amen