

## **All Things New: Encounters With The Risen Christ** *Peter the Denier*

We are looking at some people who had an encounter with the Risen Christ. When they did, all things became new. We considered Cleopas the Despondent as he walked back home to Emmaus on that first Easter morn. Jesus appeared alongside and opened the Scriptures to him, explaining why it was necessary that he die, but that he would rise again.

We considered the story of Thomas the Doubter. In Jesus' encounter with Thomas, he didn't scold him for his doubt. Rather, Jesus revealed himself to this disciple – and he believed; all things became new.

We saw in the lives of these two men the common struggles that we experience as well – despondency that comes from disappointment, and doubt that comes from a lack of understanding and disbelief. Both very human responses.

Today, we look at another encounter with the Risen Christ. And we need to examine another human experience that most of us know well in our own lives: failure. This is the story of Peter the Denier. Let's begin by building a profile of this disciple of Jesus.

- By trade – a fisherman; a hard-working, tough-headed businessman
- By temperament – a leader; there are four lists of the 12 apostles in the New Testament. In every list, Peter is first.
- By personality – eager, passionate, bold, outspoken, decisive (even if wrong)

There is much to like about Peter. He was a risk-taker. Remember the incident out on the Sea of Galilee when Jesus came walking on the water. Peter spoke up and said, "Lord, if that's you, tell me to come." When the Lord said, "Come," Peter bounded out of the boat and began to walk on the water.

Peter had an innate gift for leadership. He was always in the lead, often acting as the spokesman for the disciples. Remember when Jesus asked the disciples who people were saying he was? They replied, "Some say John the Baptizer, some say Elijah, others say Jeremiah or one of the other prophets."

Jesus then asked the twelve: "But who do you say that I am?" Peter stepped forward and declared: "You are the Christ – the Messiah, the Son of the living God."

Peter played a prominent role in the beginning of the Christian church. He stood with the other apostles on the day of Pentecost and delivered a masterful sermon that led to the conversion of 3000 people who believed his message. He played a prominent role in those early years in Jerusalem. God used him to confirm the message of the Gospel to the Samaritans and the Gentiles. He was a remarkable man.

Peter had many compelling strengths; he also had many glaring weaknesses. It is true that oftentimes our weaknesses are the flip sides of our strengths. For example, in Peter's eagerness and verbosity, he often put his foot in his mouth – engaging the mouth before engaging the mind. He did things seemingly without much thought.

He was quick-tempered, acting often with brashness. Remember when the Roman soldiers came to the Garden of Gethsemane? Battle-trained soldiers coming to arrest Jesus. What did Peter do? He whipped out his sword and took a swing at the servant of the high priest who had come along for the arrest. What was Peter going to do – take on everyone, one at a time?

Do you want to see a great example of the flip side of Peter's strengths which became weakness? Back in Matthew 16, right after Peter made that grand statement about Jesus' divine identity, Jesus began to tell his disciples that he was going to have to suffer many things – that he would be killed, but would be raised from the dead. Look at Matthew's account:

And Peter took him (Jesus) aside and began to rebuke him, saying, "Far be it from you, Lord! This shall never happen to you." – *Matthew 16:22*

Bold, caring, protective, assertive – I suppose all those things. But we need to read on:

But he turned and said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me. For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man." – *Matthew 16:23*

Whoa! One moment he was blessed, the next accursed. Peter seemed to be caught between these two frequently. He took a courageous stand before the church leaders in Jerusalem, defending the truth that the Gentiles had received the gospel by faith and should be accepted as full partners into the church that the Holy Spirit had begun at Pentecost.

Then we see from Paul's letter to the Galatians, how Peter had come to the city of Antioch to see how the church was doing and to encourage the believers there. While there he regularly ate with the Gentile believers. But when a delegation came up from Jerusalem, Peter withdrew from relating to those Gentiles. Paul opposed Peter to his face, calling him on the carpet for his hypocrisy.

There is no greater failure on Peter's part in our minds, I am sure, than that related to the time of Jesus' arrest and subsequent death.

Let's look first at the set-up. There were two things that happened in the Upper Room that provide the context to what followed.

1) At some point in the evening, an argument broke out among the disciples about which one of them was the greatest. I find it hard to believe that Peter was not in the middle of this ridiculous debacle. Look at Jesus' rebuke of the twelve and in particular, Peter.

And he said to them, “The kings of the Gentiles exercise lordship over them, and those in authority over them are called benefactors. But not so with you. Rather, let the greatest among you become as the youngest, and the leader as one who serves. For who is the greater, one who reclines at table or one who serves? Is it not the one who reclines at table? But I am among you as the one who serves....

“Simon, Simon, behold, Satan has demanded to have you, that he might sift you like wheat, but I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned again, strengthen your brothers.” – *Luke 22:25-32*

Jesus was predicting Peter’s failure. But he also predicted his recovery and restoration though I don’t think either registered with Peter.

2) In Matthew’s account we read of Jesus’ prediction of coming events and Peter’s response to that. Turn in your Bible to Matthew, chapter 26. **Matthew 26:31-35**

I am reminded here of Paul’s admonition in 1 Corinthians 10:12: “Therefore let him who thinks he stands take heed that he does not fall.”

Or maybe it should be the old saying about bullies and those full of themselves: “The bigger they are, the harder they fall.” And great was the fall of Peter.

### **Matthew 26:57-58, 69-75**

Peter failed and he failed stupendously, spectacularly. Luke adds a small but significant detail in his gospel. I want to pick up his account at the third time when Peter was identified as having been with Jesus:

But Peter said, “Man, I do not know what you are talking about.” And immediately, while he was still speaking, the rooster crowed. And the Lord turned and looked at Peter. And Peter remembered the saying of the Lord, how he had said to him, “Before the rooster crows today, you will deny me three times.” And he went out and wept bitterly. – *Luke 22:60-62*

Peter failed miserably and his failure cut him to the core of his soul. How could he ever recover from this failure? How could he ever be forgiven? We would be left with a very sour and distasteful memory of Peter if this is how it all ended.

Now turn to John, chapter 21, the last chapter of John’s gospel. The wonderful message of John 21 is the restoration of Peter. **John 21:1-17**

Peter’s denial was a public act; now Peter’s restoration is a public act.  
Peter’s denial was three-fold; now his restoration is three-fold.

I love the symmetry. Jesus restores Peter. He restores Peter for his own sake. Peter was a defeated man – humiliated, devastated, shamed. Can you imagine how he must have cringed

within when in the very presence of the one he so cowardly denied? He needed restoration for his own sake.

Jesus also restored Peter for Jesus' sake. God was not through with Peter. He was restored so that he might be a more effective servant of Christ.

Peter denied his Lord three times; he affirms his love for the Lord three times; and three times he is commissioned to serve the flock of God. Peter experienced the wonderful grace of God – even in his greatest failure.

I want to spend the rest of our time this morning talking more about the subject of failure by way of application. There are a number of principles about failure that I want to share with you.

**1) Failure is common to all.** We have all failed at one time or another – as a parent, child, student, team member, friend, co-worker, follower of Jesus. We have failed publicly, privately and morally.

Now some of you might want to argue this point. Let me ask you to evaluate your life in this way:

- Doctors say you should drink eight glasses of water a day – How are you doing?
- Dentists say you should brush after every meal and floss every day – Okay?
- Car specialists say you should never allow your gas tank to get below half full.
- Accountants say you should never have less than \$100 in checking account...ever.
- You are supposed to make your bed up every morning.
- If you are a man you are not supposed to allow your body fat to rise above 17 %.
- Christians should read their Bible every day – Say what?
- Doctor's say that the average adult should get no less than 8 hours sleep per night.
- You are supposed to always do the speed limit—I don't think we even want to go there.
- You are supposed to have at least 3 months salary set aside for an emergency.

Failure comes in all sizes, shapes and colors, doesn't it? Some are very ordinary; others very spectacular. Just remember, we have all failed.

**2) Failure doesn't make you a failure.** A common denominator for people that learn how to deal with failure and hardships in life is that they don't give up. They refuse to focus on the failures and weaknesses and focus upon their strengths.

Michael Jordan did a basketball commercial where he walks in the arena and the people are chanting, "Michael! Michael!" He says, "I've missed 9,000 shots in my career. I've lost almost 300 games. Twenty-six times I've been trusted to take the game-winning shot and I have missed. I've failed over and over and over again in my life." Then he says, "That's why I succeed." Michael Jordan didn't focus on his failures; he focused on his strengths.

- George Washington lost two-thirds of all the battles he fought during the American Revolution, but eventually won the war and became the first President of the United States.
- Napoleon graduated 42<sup>nd</sup> in a class of 43 students. Then he went out and conquered Europe.

- Billy Graham said that when he was asked to preach his first sermon, he had four sermons prepared. He was so nervous he preached all four of them in under ten minutes. What if he had concluded, “You know, I’m just not cut out for this. I don’t want to endure this kind of embarrassment again?”
- A teacher told Thomas Edison that he was “too stupid to learn.” Albert Einstein’s teacher said that little Albert was “mentally slow, unsociable, and adrift forever in his foolish dreams.”
- Paderewski, the great Polish pianist, was once told by his music teacher that his hands were much too small to master the keyboard.
- The great Italian tenor, Enrico Caruso, was told by his teacher that his voice sounded like the wind whistling through the window.
- Henry Ford forgot to put a reverse gear in his first car.
- The rhetoric teacher at Harrow School in England wrote this on 16-year-old Winston Churchill’s report card: “A conspicuous lack of success.”

Okay, okay, you made your point. What is the point? My point is that some of you feel like a failure because at some time you failed. You are only a failure if you stay down, if you allow what others have said to debilitate your willingness to move on and try again, if you play the “victim” card and wallow in self-pity.

The Apostle Paul understood this principle in the spiritual arena of his life. Remember? – “Forgetting the things in the past and reaching forward to the things that lie ahead, I press on...” This one who called himself the “chief of sinners,” a vicious persecutor of the church, would say, by the grace of God, “Imitate me, as I imitate Christ.”

Growth is stunted when we stay stuck in the past – in our failures – and don’t or won’t move on. Lucy explained to her manager, Charlie Brown, at the end of the game why she lost sight of the baseball hit to her: “Sorry I missed that easy fly ball, manager. I thought I had it, but suddenly I remembered all the others I’ve missed, and the past got in my eyes.”

### **3) Failure is often a window of opportunity**

- For growth – I suspect we personally grow more out of our failures than we do our successes. I don’t say it isn’t painful; it often is. But we become better people when we learn from our mistakes; we become better Christians when we repent, confess our sins, receive God’s forgiveness and move on.

This growth often includes an adjustment of perspective. When we fail to get all we want, it is just possible we might learn the true value of life. Such was the experience of the unknown author of this piece:

I asked for health that I might do greater things;  
I was given infirmity that I might do better things.  
I asked God for strength that I might achieve;  
I was made weak that I might learn to obey.

I asked for riches that I might be happy;  
I was given poverty that I might be wise.  
I asked for power and the praise of men;  
I was given weakness to sense my need of God.

I asked for all things that I might enjoy life;  
I was given life that I might enjoy all things.  
I got nothing I asked for but everything I hoped for;  
In spite of myself, my prayers were answered—  
I am among all men most richly blessed.

- For learning and developing skills – how did you learn to ride a bike? You fell off any number of times until you mastered that skill. Failure became a stepping stone to success. And I suspect we appreciate our success even more coming through failure.
- For re-direction. Charles Colson tells of his prison experience in his book *Loving God*. While in prison he remembered what his life had been like before prison – the honors he had earned, court cases he had won, and the prestige and power that came with his government positions. But the failure of Watergate changed all that.

But, in hindsight – in God-sight – his biggest failure was his greatest victory. Prison was the beginning of God's greatest work in his life. Out of his failure came forgiveness and a re-direction in life that God has used to touch the lives of hundreds of thousands of prisoners, their families, and those volunteers that have been part of Prison Fellowship.

Sometimes our failure is the set-up for spectacular success. One dark night outside a small town in Minnesota, a fire started inside the local chemical plant and in a blink of an eye it exploded into massive flames. The alarm went out to all the fire departments for miles around.

When the volunteer fire fighters appeared on the scene, the chemical company president rushed to the fire chief and said, "All our secret formulas are in the vault in the center of the plant. They must be saved. I will give \$50,000 to the fire department that brings them out intact."

But the roaring flames held the firefighters off. Soon more fire departments had to be called in as the situation became desperate. As the firemen arrived, the president shouted out that the offer was now \$100,000 to the fire department who could bring out the company's secret files.

From the distance, a lone siren was heard as another fire truck came into sight. It was the nearby Norwegian rural township volunteer fire company composed mainly of Norwegians over the age

of 65. To everyone's amazement, that little run-down fire engine roared right past all the newer sleek engines that were parked outside the plant.

Without even slowing down it drove straight into the middle of the inferno. Outside, the other firemen watched as the Norwegian old timers jumped off right in the middle of the fire and fought it back on all sides. It was a performance and effort never seen before.

Within a short time, the Norske old timers had extinguished the fire and had saved the secret formulas. The grateful chemical company president announced that for such a superhuman feat he was upping the reward to \$200,000, and walked over to personally thank each of the brave fire fighters.

The local TV news reporter rushed in to capture the event on film, asking their chief, "What are you going to do with all that money?"

"Vell," said Ole Larsen, the 70-year-old fire chief, "Da first thing ve gonna do is fix da brakes on dat truck!"

- For greater capacity for understanding – those who have faced failure and weakness often have more empathy with others who fail. Failure is a great leveler of human pride.

**4) Failure does not disqualify you for God's service.** If that were true, what would have happened to Abraham, Moses, David, Paul, or Peter.

What do you suppose Peter was thinking as he, with the other disciples, gathered together with the Lord on the beach that day? He had to wonder if he would ever be of use to the Lord. But that's the wonderful thing about the grace of God.

Some of you might be thinking, "I have failed God so badly, so often, I see no way that he would still want to use me." Listen, God's grace has given all of us a second chance at service, and a third chance, and a hundredth chance. Will you believe his intentions in your life and for your life? What are those intentions? That's my last principle this morning.

**5) God can and will use everything in your life for your ultimate good and his ultimate glory.** He really does have a plan for your life. Paul talked about that in Romans eight:

And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to his purpose. For those whom he foreknew, he also predestined to become conformed to the image of his Son.... – *Romans 8:28-29*

Do you mean even my failures? Yes. Even my sin? Yes. Paul lists no exceptions. His focus is on the eternal plan of God for every person whom he has saved, every person who has believed in Christ.

Is there any greater illustration of apparent human failure being, in reality, a divine success than the cross? Satan thought he had succeeded in bringing about Jesus' failure. The disciples must have pondered the failure to usher in God's kingdom as they understood and hoped it to be. But Good Friday was not the final act. Easter was on its way!

There is one final thing I want you to see in Peter's restoration. It's a sequence of words in Jesus' questions. I don't want to make too much out of this, but there is something there.

Two of the Greek words for *love* are used in John 21. One is *philēō*, which speaks of brotherly love, tender affection; the other is *agapáō*, which is God's kind of love – an unselfish, serving love. The conversation goes like this:

“Peter, do you *agapáō* me?” “Lord, you know I *philēō* you.”

“Peter, do you *agapáō* me?” “Lord, you know I *philēō* you.”

“Peter, do you *philēō* me?” “Lord, you know I *philēō* you.”

“Peter, do you love me like I, the Risen Christ, love you?” “Lord, I love you like a brother.”

“Peter, do you love me like I, the Risen Christ, love you?” “Lord, I love you like a brother.”

“Peter, do you love me like a brother”. “Lord, you know I love you like a brother.”

Jesus went to where Peter was – what he was capable of at that time in his life.

You might feel that you can't somehow measure up to where you know God wants you to be. But, he comes to where you are and says, “Shall we walk together? I'll take you where I want you to go. I'll make you what I want you to be. I'll accomplish through you what I want to do through you.”