

BROKEN VESSELS: HOW GOD USES IMPERFECT PEOPLE



Brokenness and pain.

Unfortunately, brokenness and pain are universal. It may have been from the pain of that young summer love that ended prematurely, the pain of abandonment and isolation, the pain of chronic illness or death, or the pain we bring on ourselves through our sin and failure. But we all know what pain feels like, and it feels like being broken.

Like clay jars, we are fragile. We can be easily broken—but we do not have to remain “broken vessels.” We are never beyond the healing and redeeming power of God. In the face of failure, God responds with restoration. In spite of our shortcomings, God will work in and through us. In the midst of our circumstances, God will help us endure.

God doesn’t stop there! He seeks to use us to speak into the lives of other “broken vessels.” He uses our experiences with His grace and power to comfort others. He desires to use us to help our neighbors and loved ones encounter the God who brings hope and restoration.

“Now we have this treasure in clay jars, so that this extraordinary power may be from God and not from us” (2 Cor. 4:7). We are broken vessels, but this great treasure—the good news of Jesus Christ—shines through our brokenness.

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GET INTO THE STUDY



5 minutes

SAY: “For the next six sessions we will be discussing the way Christ uses imperfect people.” Invite members to turn to **page 3** in the **Personal Study Guide (PSG)** and review session titles.

LEADER PACK: Point to the session titles on **Item 8: Broken Vessels**. Note that these sessions focus on passages from both the Old and New Testaments.



DISCUSS: Draw attention to the picture (**PSG, p. 94**) as you introduce **Question #1: When have you really enjoyed making a mess?**

SESSION 1 A FRESH START



The Point

We fail; Jesus restores.

The Bible Meets Life

When we come to faith in Christ, we realize there is nothing we can do to earn a right relationship with God. We fail, but Jesus gives us hope. Now that we are Christians, we still fail, but we sometimes chastise

ourselves for failing. The same grace we needed for salvation is the same grace we need to live it out. The hope we have in Christ is grounded in grace, and we need to experience that grace day by day.

The Passages

John 18:15-18, 25-27; 21:15-19

The Setting

The initial events of the focal verses occurred on the night before Jesus' crucifixion, at the high priest's residence in Jerusalem after Jesus' arrest. The latter events took place after Jesus' resurrection (perhaps a couple weeks later). After the Festivals of Passover and of Unleavened Bread, Jesus' disciples left Jerusalem and returned to Galilee. One morning on the shore of the Sea of Tiberias (Sea of Galilee), Jesus appeared to seven of His disciples while they were fishing.

John 18:15-18,25-27

15 And Simon Peter followed Jesus, and so did another disciple: that disciple was known unto the high priest, and went in with Jesus into the palace of the high priest.

16 But Peter stood at the door without. Then went out that other disciple, which was known unto the high priest, and spake unto her that kept the door, and brought in Peter.

17 Then saith the damsel that kept the door unto Peter, Art not thou also one of this man’s disciples? He saith, I am not.

18 And the servants and officers stood there, who had made a fire of coals; for it was cold: and they warmed themselves: and Peter stood with them, and warmed himself.

.....
25 And Simon Peter stood and warmed himself. They said therefore unto him, Art not thou also one of his disciples? He denied it, and said, I am not.

26 One of the servants of the high priest, being his kinsman whose ear Peter cut off, saith, Did not I see thee in the garden with him?

27 Peter then denied again: and immediately the cock crew.

Even followers of Jesus still falter and fail.

Verse 15-16. On the night before Jesus’ crucifixion, several events happened quickly in different locations in Jerusalem. John reported that after Jesus was arrested, the authorities “led him away to Annas first,” and later, “Annas had sent him bound unto Caiaphas the high priest” (John 18:13,-24). Annas had previously been the high priest (and so still retained the title) and Caiaphas “was the high priest that same year” (v. 13). While the Jewish leaders questioned Jesus inside the high priest’s residence, another scene was unfolding outside in the courtyard. **Simon Peter** and **another disciple** had **followed Jesus** and those who had arrested Him after they left the garden of Gethsemane. **That disciple was known unto the high priest.** The word *known* could refer to a relative,

OPTION: IN ADVANCE, locate and prepare to show the Michael Jordan Nike® “Failure” commercial. A link to this clip can be found at ***BibleStudiesForLife.com/AdultExtra***. Use the video clip before or as a follow-up to the question. Discuss reactions to the video. **Say:** “We fail, but Jesus gives us hope.”

GUIDE: Direct attention to **The Bible Meets Life (PSG, p. 95)**. Highlight the examples the author gives of how we sometimes hit rock bottom.

Reinforce the importance of being restored in Christ by reading **The Point (PSG, p. 95): We fail; Jesus restores.**

PRAY: Begin the Bible study with prayer. Ask for God’s wisdom in understanding His Word in this study. Thank Him for the way He takes us where we are and restores us fully.

STUDY THE BIBLE

John 18:15-18,25-27



15 minutes

GUIDE: Before reading the passage, set the context by summarizing the information in **The Setting** on page 98.

READ: Ask a volunteer to read John 18:15-18,25-27.

GUIDE: Use **Bible Commentary 1** to explain the background for Peter's encounter with the servants and officers as he sought to blend in.

SUMMARIZE: Highlight the following information from **PSG pages 96-97:**

Now Peter found himself surrounded by a group of soldiers, temple police from the chief priests, and Pharisees—all led by Judas Iscariot, a fellow disciple (John 18:3).

(Continued on next page.)

a close friend, or simply any person who was not a stranger. John may have actually been a distant relative of the high priest. Whatever the case, his relationship was such that he had access to a secure property. Thus, he **went in with Jesus into the palace of the high priest**. The **other disciple** went back out to the courtyard, **spake unto her that kept the door**, and gained entry for Peter. The identity of this *other disciple* is unknown; most scholars, however, believe it was John, the son of Zebedee, who rarely identified himself in his own narratives.

Verse 17. The other disciple may have been known as a follower of Jesus. Perhaps the **damsel that kept the door** knew this. As Peter entered the courtyard, the doorkeeper may have been shocked and surprised that anyone who knew Jesus would have been there. So she asked, **Art not thou also one of this man's disciples?** Peter quickly responded: **I am not**. This was his first denial.

1 ▶ Verse 18. Jerusalem is on a mountain located at the edge of a desert. At night it can get cold and blustery. This is particularly true in the month of Nisan (March-April) around the time of Passover. Because of the chilly night air, **the servants and officers had made fire of coals**; and stood around it warming themselves. (John will mention another charcoal fire in 21:9.) These *officers* likely were Levites, members of the police who kept order at the temple, guarded the temple complex, and protected the high priest and his family. That didn't seem to bother Peter even though some of them surely had been in the group that arrested Jesus. In fact, **Peter stood with them, and warmed himself.** ◀

Verse 25. While Jesus was being questioned inside the house (John 18:19-24), Peter was about to face an interrogation of his own. Some of those who were also huddled around the fire repeated the question Peter had heard earlier: **Art not thou also one of his disciples?** Peter again **denied it**; Matthew 26:72 indicates that "he denied with an oath."

Verse 26. Perhaps before the echo of Peter's words had subsided, another person joined in. This time the question became more personal and accusatory. John noted this questioner was **his kinsman whose ear Peter cut off**. Earlier that night in **the garden** of Gethsemane, Peter had cut off the ear of the high priest's servant, whom John identified

as Malchus (John 18:10). By asking, **Did not I see thee in the garden with him?** the man standing around the fire with Peter indicated he was a member of the arresting party and had seen the courageous disciple wielding a sword to protect his Master.

Verse 27. Peter, however, was anything but courageous in the high priest's courtyard. In response to this third question about his loyalty, **Peter then denied Jesus again**—the third time—just as Jesus had predicted (13:36-38). Peter insisted earlier that very night, “I will lay down my life for thy sake” (v. 37); however, three times he denied being a follower of Jesus. After Peter's third denial, **immediately the cock crew.**

Morning was approaching, but it seemed darker than ever for Peter. Just as every follower of Christ will do at some time (and at multiple times), Peter failed his Lord. But failure isn't always final, as Peter would discover in the weeks to come.

John 21:15-19

15 So when they had dined, Jesus saith to Simon Peter, Simon, son of Jonas, lovest thou me more than these? He saith unto him, Yea, Lord; thou knowest that I love thee. He saith unto him, Feed my lambs.

16 He saith to him again the second time, Simon, son of Jonas, lovest thou me? He saith unto him, Yea, Lord; thou knowest that I love thee. He saith unto him, Feed my sheep.

17 He saith unto him the third time, Simon, son of Jonas, lovest thou me? Peter was grieved because he said unto him the third time, Lovest thou me? And he said unto him, Lord, thou knowest all things; thou knowest that I love thee. Jesus saith unto him, Feed my sheep.

18 Verily, verily, I say unto thee, When thou wast young, thou girdedst thyself, and walkedst whither thou wouldest: but when thou shalt be old, thou shalt stretch forth thy hands, and another shall gird thee, and carry thee whither thou wouldest not.

Peter responded by pulling out his sword and cutting off the ear of the high priest's servant. Jesus responded, not with praise, but with a harsh reprimand telling Peter to put his sword away (vv. 10-11). Jesus then healed the man's ear (Luke 22:51), allowed Himself to be arrested, and was taken away. . . .

Peter's whole world had just turned over. But after all the disciples initially ran away (Matt. 26:55), Peter at least made an effort to get near enough to see and hear what was going on—as long as he could do it undetected. . . .

At first glance, it would seem that Peter wanted to stay close to Jesus, but when people began to ask about his connection to Jesus, the denials began. . . .

Peter then remembered the Lord's word and went out and wept bitterly.

DISCUSS: Question #2
(PSG, p. 97): What emotions would you have experienced in Peter's situation?

DISCUSS: Question #3
(PSG, p. 98): What factors may cause us to shrink back from identifying with Christ?

(Alternate: What are our options when we fail as big as Peter did?)

TRANSITION: “Peter had denied Jesus three times. But Jesus wasn’t going to leave Peter feeling like a failure. In the next verses, we’ll see Peter’s restoration.”

STUDY THE BIBLE

John 21:15-19



20 minutes

READ: Ask a volunteer to read John 21:15-19.

GUIDE: Using **Bible Commentary 2** on this page and page 103, explain why Jesus asked Peter three times about the apostle’s love for Him, and then commanded Peter to feed His sheep.

19 This spake he, signifying by what death he should glorify God. And when he had spoken this, he saith unto him, Follow me.

Jesus restores.

Verse 15. Jesus appeared to many of His followers on several occasions in the 40 days between His resurrection and His ascension. Jesus made these appearances to prove He was alive and to confirm His identity as the Messiah, the Son of God. Jesus also used this time to teach His followers and prepare them for their mission as His apostles.

Before Peter could be properly prepared for his future, however, he had to be restored from his past. Peter continued to bear the emotional weight of his betrayal for at least more than a week after it happened.

Peter had witnessed the risen Christ on at least a couple of occasions during the days after the resurrection (Luke 24:33-34,36-49; 1 Cor. 15:5,7). Like the other remaining disciples, he seemed unsure what to do with his life from that point forward. So one night Peter and six other disciples decided to go fishing (John 21:1-3). Fishing had given them a livelihood and a purpose before they first met Jesus. But after fishing all night they caught nothing ... until early in the morning when a man on the shore told them to “cast the net on the right side of the ship” (v. 6). Then “they were not able to draw [the net] for the multitude of fishes”—John put the number at “an hundred and fifty and three” (v. 11). However, when Peter suddenly realized who had spoken to them, he was so excited about seeing the Lord again, he dropped the net, “cast himself into the sea,” and swam to shore to see Jesus (v. 7).

2▶ After the disciples enjoyed a breakfast of bread and fish (vv. 9-14), Jesus initiated an important conversation with **Simon Peter**. As the dialogue began, Jesus asked, **Simon, son of Jonas, lovest thou me more than these?** How Jesus addressed Peter was as significant as the question He asked. **Simon** was his given name; Peter was the name Jesus had given him on their first meeting (1:42). Peter means “rock,” but that’s not how Jesus referred to him on this occasion. On that cold, dark night in the courtyard, Peter had demonstrated his loyalty was not as solid as he had professed. Without mentioning Peter’s failure, Jesus confronted its reality simply by how He addressed this disciple, the **son of Jonas**.

At no point in this conversation did Jesus ever directly address Peter's denial. But with each question the Lord confronted Peter about his true loyalty. Jesus first asked him, *Lovest thou me more than these?* While the first part of the question is straightforward, the last word poses a bit of a challenge to interpret. To what or whom was Jesus referring when he mentioned *these*? Certainly Jesus could have pointed to the boat and miraculous catch of fish, wanting to know if Peter loved Him more than he loved the thrill of fishing. However, it's more likely Jesus pointed to the others with them on the beach and asked whether Peter's love for Him was greater than that of the other disciples. After all, Peter had once brashly proclaimed a commitment to Christ greater than that of all the other disciples (Mark 14:29). Perhaps Jesus was testing Peter's humility and challenging him to consider his words carefully before making bold pronouncements.

In response to Jesus' question, Peter replied, **Yea, Lord; thou knowest that I love thee.** Despite his failure, Peter was certain Jesus knew His apostle's love for Him was genuine. Peter was no longer willing to assert he was better than the other disciples. Failure can be a great teacher, and it seems Peter had learned at least not to compare his commitment with that of others.

Jesus simply replied to Peter, **Feed my lambs.** Directed to a fisherman, this command may have seemed strange. But considering the words and actions of Jesus over the previous three years, it made perfect sense. Jesus had declared He is "the good shepherd" (John 10:11,14). During His ministry Jesus demonstrated He is the One who directs, protects, provides, heals, and so much more; He did this for the people of His flock. The disciples witnessed His actions and even participated with Jesus in caring for people. Thus, with that phrase Jesus effectively was commissioning Peter to assume the responsibility of leadership for this task. In addition to calling Peter to be a fisher of men (Matt. 4:19) and do the work of evangelism, Jesus was calling Peter to do the work of a pastor in caring for the flock.

The tense of the verb translated *feed* indicates an ongoing action; it could be rendered "keep on feeding." This was not to be a one-time action, after which Peter would move on to another, perhaps more exciting task. It would require confident words from a leader who was constantly looking to move forward, as well as patience and care from a humble servant toward those who are young and vulnerable. ◀

Verse 16. A second time Jesus posed an almost identical question to **Simon, son of Jonas.** This time, however, Jesus

SUMMARIZE: In John 21, we see God's pattern of restoration in this, the third time in John's Gospel that Jesus revealed Himself to His disciples after His resurrection (PSG, pp. 99-100).

Peter and the disciples returned to what they'd always known—fishing—but after an entire night of not catching anything, Jesus called out to and told them to "Cast the net on the right side of the ship, and ye shall find" (v. 6).

They obeyed and were rewarded with such a large catch of fish they couldn't haul the net in.

John said to Peter, "It is the Lord" (v. 7).

Impulsive as always, Peter jumped into the water and swam to the shore to be with Jesus—even though the boat was only 100 yards away.

After they had eaten breakfast, we see a personal interaction between Jesus and Peter. Jesus asked Peter three times about his love for Him. Three times—the same number of times Peter had betrayed Jesus.

GUIDE: Using **Bible**

Commentary 3 describe the difference between the Greek words used for *love* and the nuance this perhaps adds to this important encounter.

SUMMARIZE: Ask a volunteer to read or summarize

Digging Deeper on **PSG page 100** for a description of the implications of Peter's reinstatement.

DISCUSS: **Question #4 (PSG, p. 101): When have you seen God bring restoration to a seemingly hopeless situation?**

GUIDE: Use **Bible**

Commentary 4 on page 105 to explain Jesus' prophetic word about Peter's death.

did not make any comparisons in inquiring about the disciple's love. And again Peter gave the same response, contending Jesus knew the extent of his love.

Once again Jesus instructed Peter on what he was to do: **Feed my sheep.** As before, the emphasis was on Christ's flock—those who would believe in Jesus and follow Him as their Lord and Savior. The slight difference in wording could have referred to the broader task Peter would undertake of teaching and guiding those who were beyond the first steps of discipleship. Or the variation in Jesus' words may simply have been stated for emphasis.

3 ▶ Verse 17. Jesus continued to explore Peter's heart by asking **him the third time.** As last time, He made no mention of comparing Peter's love with that of the other disciples.

Rather than noting Peter's reply right away, John first recorded that **Peter was grieved** because Jesus **said unto him the third time, Lovest thou me?** To be *grieved* is more than being sad or hurt; it means to be deeply distressed. Some biblical scholars explain Peter's grief in relation to the words used for "love" in the dialogue. In this passage the Greek words for "love" are *agapao*, often defined as a generous, selfless love associated with God; and *phileo*, often typified as brotherly love. These scholars suggest that Peter's grief was due to Jesus' use of *phileo* in His third question. Jesus had used *agapao* in His first two questions. "Jesus seemed to be doubting whether Peter felt even the lesser form of love for Him."¹ Other scholars argue that since the same Greek words are used interchangeably in other places in the Gospel of John (as well as *agapao* being a standard verb for "love" at the time), it is doubtful the word changes were what caused grief for Peter.² ◀

In either case, Peter was highly distressed when Jesus questioned him the third time. Also for the third time, Peter professed his love for Jesus exactly as before. But the apostle also added a new statement this time: **Lord, thou knowest all things.** Peter acknowledged that Jesus is omniscient (all-knowing) because He is God. Jesus can see into people's hearts, including Peter's. He knows our most intimate, innermost thoughts, feelings, and loyalties.

In response, Jesus again called Peter to **Feed my sheep.** This pastoral commission took hold in Peter's life. Years later he would write that church elders (leaders) were responsible to "feed the flock of God which is among you" (1 Pet. 5:2),

which is what Peter had done throughout his ministry.

Three times Peter had failed the Lord; three times he was restored and commissioned by the Lord. The foundation for Peter's future ministry, just as it is for anyone's ministry, was an ongoing love for Christ.

4 ▶ Verse 18. Jesus went on to elaborate on Peter's future and the end of his ministry. The Lord first noted the freedom Peter had formerly experienced: **when thou wast young, thou girdedst thyself, and walkedst whither thou wouldst.** But when Peter embraced Christ's commission his life would change.

Jesus continued, **when thou shalt be old,** He told Peter, his experience would be very different. **Thou shalt stretch forth thy hands, and another shall gird thee, and carry thee whither thou wouldst not.** This could refer either to being put into chains or to being nailed on a cross, where his hands/arms would be outstretched. Peter experienced both, being imprisoned for preaching the gospel and eventually being martyred in Rome during the persecution of Christians. "Tradition holds that Peter was crucified upside down because he felt unworthy to die in the same manner as Jesus."³ Jesus' words emphasized the cost of discipleship.

Verse 19. John made the point, **this spake he, signifying by what death** Peter would suffer. Jesus' words to Peter revealed that the apostle would die for his Lord, and He also indicated how he would die. What Peter boldly proclaimed on the night before Jesus' crucifixion, "I will lay down my life for thy sake" (John 13:37), would come to pass in God's time.

John also mentioned that Peter's death would **glorify God.** Several times Jesus equated His death with His or His Father's glorification (12:23,27-28; 13:31-32; 17:1). Like his Lord, Peter's willingness to follow the will of God, even unto death, would also bring glory to God.

Jesus' closing words in this section, **Follow me,** were a repetition of some of the first words He had spoken to Peter when Jesus called him to be His disciple (Matt. 4:19). In this context, however, Peter had a far greater understanding of the meaning of Jesus' command. Jesus had just laid out the reality of what discipleship would include for Peter. The disciple knew he would be following Jesus not only to learn from Him, but also to die like Him. ◀

1. R. V. G. Tasker, *The Gospel According to St. John*, vol. 4 in *Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1960), 233.

2. *Ibid.*; Gerald L. Borchert, *John 12–21*, vol. 25B in *The New American Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2002), 335.

3. Steven L. Cox, "Peter" in *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, gen. ed. Chad Brand, rev. ed. (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2015), 1253.

DISCUSS: Question #5

(PSG, p. 102): How can our group help others come to a place of restoration?

(Alternate: How can God use your story of forgiveness and restoration to help others?)

OPTION: IN ADVANCE,

locate some tarnished silverware or a tarnished brass item as well as some polish and a cleaning cloth. Display the tarnished item and state that when we fail, we shouldn't lose hope. Polish the item to restore its shine and usefulness. **Say:** "Jesus forgives, restores, and wants us to continue trusting, hoping, and following Him. Discuss how Jesus restored Peter to service and remind group members that Jesus can restore us to service in His name today."

DO: Invite volunteers to share their responses to the activity on **PSG page 102: "A Picture of Forgiveness."**

LIVE IT OUT



5 minutes

GUIDE: Emphasize **The Point:**
We fail; Jesus restores.

REVIEW: Review **Live It Out** (PSG, p. 103; see text to the right). Encourage each group member to follow through this week with at least one of the applications.

WRAP IT UP

GUIDE: Emphasize that no matter how much we think we have failed the Lord, He is always ready to restore us when we return to Him.

PRAY: "Father, help us to see ourselves as You see us, and to have the courage to step up to all that You have called us to do."

NOTE: Remind group members that **PSG pages 6-9** are there to journal one another's prayer requests.

LIVE IT OUT

Your sin—your denial of Jesus—is not the end of the road. Christ offers a fresh start. How will you live out that truth this week? Choose one of the following applications:

- ▶ **Remember.** Look back to one of the times that you sinned. Thank God for His forgiveness and consider the ways that He has brought restoration to your life.
- ▶ **Memorize.** Memorize Psalm 139:23-24. Pray this on a regular basis to keep short accounts between you and God. Is there a circumstance or sin in your life for which you need to ask God's forgiveness?
- ▶ **Write.** Write a letter of forgiveness to someone who has hurt you. Whether or not you give this letter to the person, the writing process can help you heal and fully forgive them just as Jesus has fully forgiven you.

We've all messed up, but God's grace is so deep and His love is so wide that He will always restore us when we come to Him in repentance and faith.

BIBLICAL
ILLUSTRATOR



Emmaus is thought to be the site of the house of Cleopas.

No evidence is more compelling for Jesus' physical resurrection than His postresurrection appearances. Jesus appeared numerous times to His followers.

He first appeared to Mary Magdalene in the garden, near the tomb, on Sunday morning following His crucifixion (Mark 16:9-22; John 20:11-18). Later that same morning, He appeared to the other women who came to anoint His body (Matt. 28:8-10; Mark 16:1).

He next appeared to Cleopas and an unnamed disciple on the road to Emmaus (Mark 16:12-13;

Luke 24:13-35; 1 Cor. 15:5). They reported the Lord had also appeared to Peter (Mark 16:12-13; Luke 24:13-35; 1 Cor. 15:5).

Jesus then appeared to ten of the disciples in Jerusalem (Luke 24:36-43; John 20:19-25). He appeared to them again the following week, with Thomas present (John 20:26-31; 1 Cor. 15:5). Later He revealed Himself to seven of the disciples by the Sea of Galilee, where they were fishing.

Paul wrote that more than five hundred people at one time witnessed Jesus' eighth postresurrection appearance. Paul also shared that Jesus appeared to His brother James (1 Cor. 15:6,7).

Scripture records two final appearances to the disciples, first when he gave them what some call "another commission" (Luke 24:44-49), and for the last time at His ascension (Luke 24:50-53; Acts 1:3-8).

The excerpt above is from the article "Jesus' Postresurrection Appearances" (Winter 2002-03), which relates to this session. More *Biblical Illustrator* articles are available that relate to this session. See page 7 about *Biblical Illustrator*.

SHARING THE GOOD NEWS

We often fail in life, but the truth is that if we have come to Christ through repentance and faith, He stands ready to redeem even the worst of our failures.

Each week, make yourself available either before or after the session to speak privately with anyone in your group who wants to know more about becoming a Christian. See the article, "Leading Someone to the Greatest Decision of All," on page 2 for guidance in leading a person to Christ.

Remind group members that **page 2** in the **PSG** offers guidance in how to become a Christian. Encourage believers to consider using this article as they have opportunities to lead others to Christ.



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