

BROKEN VESSELS



Brokenness and pain.

Unfortunately, they 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.

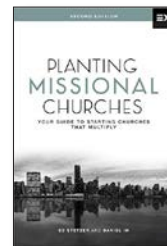
Like clay jars, we are fragile. We can be easily broken—but we do not have to remain “broken vessels.” We are never beyond the healing and redeeming power of God. In the face of failure, God responds with restoration. In spite of our shortcomings, God will work in and through us. In the midst of our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

“But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellency of the power may be of God, and not of 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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SESSION 1

A FRESH START



When have you really enjoyed making a mess?

QUESTION #1

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We fail; Jesus restores.

THE PASSAGES

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

THE BIBLE MEETS LIFE

Making a mess in the kitchen is one thing. Making a mess of life is quite another. I can clean the kitchen to the point you'd never know I was in there. But when I make a mess of my life, I can't just wipe away the evidence—or the consequences—with a good disinfectant.

Have you ever found yourself at rock bottom? It may have been because of an inappropriate relationship, a string of lies, or a temptation or habit that seemed to gradually take over everything in life. At that moment, you stand at a crossroad. Do you continue down the road you're on, continuing to repeat the mistakes because the pain of changing seems greater than the pain of remaining the same? Or do you look to Jesus for a way out?

Peter, one of Jesus' closest disciples, knew what it meant to mess up. He failed in a big way. But Peter's story also offers us encouragement and points us to the way out—a fresh start in Jesus Christ.

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.

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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.

Have you ever been awakened by the blaring sound of a fire alarm, or by an urgent phone call? If so, your adrenaline likely kicked in, causing your heart to race. Peter may have felt that same fearful rush at Gethsemane. Earlier, Jesus had wanted him to pray, but instead he slept (Matt. 26:36-46). Now he 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).

Peter reacted 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.

Keep this background in mind as you read Peter’s denials. This context doesn’t excuse Peter’s denials, but it does help us recognize that he was surely exhausted and confused. His 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 so undetected.

“Another disciple,” who is generally acknowledged to be John, also followed Jesus into the courtyard of the high priest. He was an acquaintance of the high priest, so he was able to get into the high priest’s courtyard, but Peter stayed outside by the door. 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. The doorkeeper asked Peter, “Art not thou also one of this man’s disciples?” Peter replied with an emphatic, “I am not!”

Being neither a slave nor one of the temple police, Peter surely stuck out of the crowd because someone asked him, “Art not thou also one of his disciples?” Becoming defensive, Peter again denied any relation with Jesus. Peter suddenly seemed to become the center of attention. One of the high priest’s servants, who had been in the garden and likely saw Peter cut off the other servant’s ear, asked, “Did not I see thee in the garden with him?” At this point, Peter’s adrenaline must’ve been rushing because without even thinking, he denied it again, even though the accusation came from an eyewitness who saw what had just happened!

At that moment a rooster crowed. In Luke’s account, he noted that Jesus turned and looked at Peter. Peter then remembered the Lord’s word and went out and wept bitterly.

What emotions would you have experienced in Peter’s situation?

QUESTION #2

When Peter declared that he would lay down his life for Jesus at the Last Supper, the Lord predicted that he also would betray Him. Peter's betrayal would come in the form of denial—and he would deny Him not once or twice, but three times (John 13:37-38). This no doubt came as a shock to Peter. Simon Peter was the one who had walked on water, and he was the first of the disciples to confess, “Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God” (Matt. 16:16). Thus, Peter responded like many of us surely would: “Though I should die with thee, yet will I not deny thee!” (Matt. 26:35).

Maybe we're not so different from Peter after all. We have all been in circumstances where we gave in to fear or succumbed to the crowd and denied Jesus in one way or another. We may not have overtly proclaimed as Peter did, “I don't know Jesus”; but we've had our own moments when we tried to hide our relationship to Him.

Yes, we have denied Jesus. We can express love and allegiance to Jesus, but in certain situations, we may feel afraid or try to blend in. We may react with tired emotions or without looking to Christ first for strength. Regardless of the reason, our words or actions deny that we know Jesus. And when we choose to sin, we are denying the One we say is Lord over our lives.

Somewhere along the way, “a rooster crows.” We are hit with a reminder that our words and actions denied that we know Jesus. When that happens to us—not if, but when—what do we do? What happens after we fail? Do we write ourselves off as failures? Do we just try to get on with our lives as if nothing happened? We will see from the life of Peter a far better option awaits.

What factors may cause us to shrink back from identifying as Christ followers?

QUESTION #3

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.

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

Life can feel hopelessly dark after we've sinned. We may have failed God, but life does not have to be despairing. When life feels like one of those sleepless nights when you feel morning may never come, remember, it does come. And with it comes the ever-new grace and mercy of God.

We can't imagine what "dark night" Peter experienced after his denial of Jesus. After Judas betrayed Jesus, he was so remorseful he committed suicide. Peter's grief, however, led him in a different direction: he went fishing. Peter had seen Jesus after His resurrection, but he might have thought his usefulness to Jesus was over. Maybe he just wanted a distraction from his failure—to return to the one thing he could do well. But Jesus had a different plan.

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. 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). This was not the first time Jesus had called His disciples to throw the net on the right side of the boat after a night of unsuccessful fishing. The first time the net came back overflowing with fish just as it did here (Luke 5:4-11).

Did Peter recall that previous time? Because, 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.

We might wonder how Peter felt at this moment. After proudly declaring he would never deny Jesus (13:37), he had done just that—three times over—at the very moment when allegiance mattered the most. Then Jesus died. Even though Jesus was now among them again, things were surely different for Peter simply because of the embarrassment and regret he must have felt. Yet Jesus gave Peter three opportunities to declare his trust, allegiance, and love for Him.

DIGGING DEEPER



IMPLICATIONS OF PETER’S REINSTATEMENT

The issue of denying the Lord became a significant problem in the early church during times of persecution, and processes of reinstatement were debated. Hardliners were often not willing to accept those who denied their Lord while others

may have tended to accept such deviants too easily. This periscope of the questioning of Peter must have served as a model of a median position willing to reestablish deviants, but not without first testing their commitment.

Gerald L. Borchert, *John 12-21*, vol. 25B of *The New American Commentary*, gen. ed. E. Ray Clendenen (Nashville: Broadman Press, 2002), 334.

A key word in verses 15-19 is *love*. In English, the deeper impact of this passage is lost to us because the English language has only one word for love—so it seems like Jesus was asking Peter the same question three times. However, if we look at the original Greek, which has multiple words for love, we unearth a deeper interaction.

In the first interaction, when Jesus asked Peter if he loves Him, Jesus used *agapao*, the deep, affectionate, and cherishing type of love that God has for Jesus and that Jesus has for us. Interestingly, Peter didn't respond with that same word for love; instead, he used *phileo*, which refers to more of a brotherly, personal love. In the second interaction, Jesus again used the *agapao* term for love, and Peter again used *phileo* in his response.

In the third interaction, however, Jesus switched to *phileo*, the same version of love Peter had been using. Peter responded in kind, with the same *phileo* version of love.

Why didn't Peter respond with the same *agapao* version of love Jesus used? Perhaps he was feeling too guilty from his betrayal and felt unworthy to use the higher form of love since he had not displayed it on the night of his denials. Or perhaps Peter intentionally used the more personable version of love, *phileo*, because he wanted to show Jesus how deeply repentant he was.

In either case, what matters most is that, each time Jesus asked the question, He followed up with a commission. Jesus not only forgave Peter for his three denials, but He restored and commissioned him to service. "Feed my lambs." "Feed my sheep." "Feed my sheep." Peter was a broken vessel, but the past was forgiven, and Jesus desired for Peter to move forward in ministry.

When have you seen God bring restoration to a seemingly hopeless situation?

QUESTION #4

The beautiful thing about God is He does not simply offer forgiveness, but He wants to restore, redeem, and renew our past, our hurts, and our failures. He takes the broken vessels of our lives and makes us whole again. As Christ forgives and restores, He also commissions us and calls us to serve Him and His kingdom.

Whatever our past sin and failure—however we might have denied Christ—He forgives. He restores. He chooses to work through us for His glory.

How can our group help others come to a place of restoration?

QUESTION #5

A PICTURE OF FORGIVENESS

What symbols do you associate with forgiveness? Use the space below to sketch a picture that represents forgiveness to you.

Write a brief prayer of thanks to the Lord for the forgiveness He has shown you.

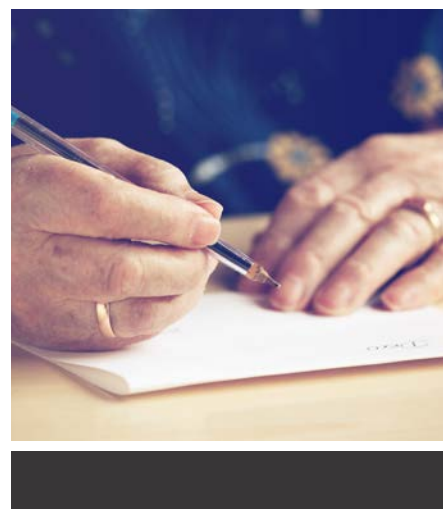
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LIVE IT OUT

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.



Share with others how you will live out this study: [#BSFLbrokenvessels](https://twitter.com/BSFLbrokenvessels)