

Broken Things

John 21:15-17

Introduction

Kathy Ormsby was a success story. She was a dean's list student at North Carolina State University, majoring in pre-med. She was an All-American distance runner. At the University of Pennsylvania Penn Relays, in April, 1986, she set an American collegiate record for 10,000 meters. She was "on a roll". She actually qualified for the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) championships in 3,000, 5,000 and 10,000 meters. She was a celebrity. Everything seemed so right for this twenty-one year old junior.

Something, however, was dangerously wrong. She had become obsessed with winning. In the first week of June, 1986, she began the 10,000 meter run at the NCAA track championships in Indianapolis. At 6,500 meters, she abruptly quit. Totally burned out, her life's purpose suddenly becoming clear – it meant nothing more to her than just winning one more race. She turned and jogged out of the stadium, ran to a bridge two blocks away, and jumped. She fell forty or fifty feet onto a flood plain.

Now, she is paralyzed from the chest down. Kathy Ormsby will never run again. The *Seattle Times* article of June 11, 1986, asked the question, "How many other athletes, obsessed with winning, are heading for a fall?"

The inspiration and authenticity of the Bible is proven over and over again, as it records the failures of its main characters. Left alone, human minds would fashion the story so that the fatal flaws and defects of each character would be couched or hidden from view.

One of the three closest friends Simon Peter had on earth wrote a portion of inspired Scripture and, in it, he included Peter's failure. It is recorded in no-nonsense language; holding none of the dark truth from view. John, the author, followed the Holy Spirit's inspiring direction and penned into immortality, the failure of his friend.

In our study of this account, called the gospel of John, we have observed Peter like a proud, strong athlete who was obsessed with winning; who boasted

he would never lose. Then, we saw him emotionally and spiritually paralyzed by fear and then, failure. We were left to wonder if he would ever run again.

This story has a happy ending – John also included, in his final comments, the wonderful restoration of Peter to fellowship and service.

It is really a story of how God restores and uses broken things, broken hearts – broken people, for His glory.

The Questions of Love

Turn to John's account of this incredible story. It is in chapter 21 and we will begin with verses 12 through 14.

Jesus said to them, "Come and have breakfast." None of the disciples ventured to question Him, "Who are You?" knowing that it was the Lord. Jesus came and took the bread, and gave them, and the fish likewise. This is now the third time that Jesus was manifested to the disciples, after He was raised from the dead.

Now, in verses 15 through 17, one of the most incredible conversations between God and man is recorded.

So when they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon, son of John, do you love Me more than these?" He said to Him, "Yes, Lord; You know that I love You." He said to him, "Tend My lambs." He said to him again a second time, "Simon, son of John, do you love Me?" He said to Him, "Yes, Lord; You know that I love You." He said to him, "Shepherd My sheep." He said to him the third time, "Simon, son of John, do you love Me?" Peter was grieved because He said to him the third time, "Do you love Me?" And he said to Him, "Lord, You know all things; You know that I love You." Jesus said to him, "Tend My sheep."

In order to understand and apply this passage, let us break it down into its three sections. Each of the

three interchanges between Jesus and Peter include a question, a response, and a command.

The First Question

Look again at the first interchange in verse 15. The first question is in verse 15a.

Simon, son of John, do you love Me more than these?

Now, this is an intriguing question – for many reasons. One reason is its comparative nature. “Peter, do you love Me *more than these*?”

Let me give three possible interpretations:

- Do you love Me more than these fishing nets; this catch of fish; your family business?

In other words, “Are you willing to leave your occupation and the security of your generation-old family practice to follow Me and do My will?”

- Do you love Me more than these men?

These are your closest friends and your relationships have been rooted in rich fertile soil. Are you willing to leave those whom you love to follow Me?

- Do you love Me more than these men love Me?

I frankly believe that this was in the mind of the Lord. It harkens back to the conversation, recorded in Matthew, chapter 26, when Jesus declared in the upper room, in verse 21b,

. . . one of you will betray Me.

They all declared, in verse 22b,

. . . Surely not I, Lord?

Then Jesus told Peter, in verse 34b,

. . . you shall deny Me three times.

Peter responds, in verses 33b and 35b,

. . . Even though all may fall away because of You, I will never fall away. . . . Even if I have to die with You, I will not deny You. . .

.

In other words, “Although every other one of these men deny You, Lord, my love for You is far stronger and greater than theirs . . . I will be the one who stays true.”

“Okay, Peter, now do you love Me more than these men love Me? Will you really be the one who stays true?”

And, by the way, the Lord selects the Greek word, “agapao,” for “love” when He asks Peter, “Peter, do you love, or ‘agapao,’ Me?”

This is the love word that is intellectual, volitional; it is a word of commitment, no matter what happens. This love word is used to express the commitment between a husband and wife.

So Jesus is asking Peter, “Do you really have that rock solid love for Me? Are you unwavering in your commitment?”

Before we leave this first question, may I ask you a question?

If Christ were talking to you beside a warm fire, and He were to ask you, “Do you love Me more than these?” – for you, what would “these” refer to? Would it be career, house, kids, spouse, future security, health?

One of the greatest revelations of your love for God, is your response when He removes one of these.

The First Response

So, let us look at Peter’s first response, in verse 15b.

Yes, Lord; You know that I love You.

Peter chooses to respond with a different word for “love” – it is the Greek word “phileo”. “Phileo” means, “brotherly love; deep affection”.

It is as if Peter, who has already been deeply humbled, says, “Lord, I’ve bragged about my undying commitment to You. I am, now more than ever, aware of my weaknesses, sensitive to my limitations, and afraid to ever boast again. I have a strong love; a deep affection for You, Lord.”

The First Command

Now, Jesus gives the first command, in verse 15c.

Tend My lambs.

Jesus tells Peter to tend, or feed – using the Greek word “bosko,” My young lambs, which is “arnion,” meaning, “those young ones in the faith who are so prone to wander”.

Three Observations

I want to make several observations at this point.

The sheep belong to Christ, not the church.

1. Observation number one is that the sheep belong to Christ, not the church.

In each of the three verses, in which Jesus gives a command to Peter, there is the possessive pronoun, “My”.

- Verse 15 – “Tend *My* lambs.”
- Verse 16 – “Shepherd *My* sheep.”
- Verse 17 – “Tend *My* sheep.”

It is possible to hold the office of pastor, but never feed the sheep.

2. Observation number two is that it is possible to hold the office of pastor, but never feed the sheep.

There are many professionals who are not pastors, as they never feed the flock. The word pastor, or “poimenos,” literally means, “feeder”. Jesus is saying, “Peter, make sure you fulfill your office and feed the sheep!”

Christ has a deep concern for His flock.

3. Observation number three is that, in this passage, not only is the function of spiritual leadership explained, but Christ’s deep concern for His flock is revealed.

In verse 17, Christ’s command of, “Tend My sheep,” could be translated as, “Take care of My ‘dear’ sheep.”

For everyone involved in teaching and feeding, there is a special commendation from the Lord. And, for those who enter the shepherding ministry, there is even a special reward. This is a good reminder that, in the heart of Christ, there is a deep concern for the sheep.

In fact, some of the strongest words of indictment against Old Testament Israel were against the leaders – the priests and prophets who were leading the sheep of Israel astray and whose flocks were famished, starving for lack of instruction.

There will be many pastors or Bible teachers who will see their full reward forfeited, because they led the flock that was entrusted to them into barren dry land, instead of into the rich pastureland of God’s Word.

James warned New Testament leaders with his words, in chapter 3, verse 1.

Let not many of you become teachers, my brethren, knowing that as such we shall incur a stricter judgment.

Now, this ends the first interchange.

The Second Question

Jesus asks the second question of Peter in verse 16a.

He said to him again a second time, “Simon, son of John, do you love [agapao] Me?”

There are two things that need to be mentioned before we go further:

- Notice, in this second question, that Jesus dropped any mention of comparative love; that He did not refer again to “these”. I believe it was no longer necessary, because Peter got the point. Already burning within Peter’s conscience, was the memory of his boasting that night – and his denying.
- Notice also, that the Lord addressed Peter with his old name of Simon. This undoubtedly got Peter’s attention more than anything else.

Go back to John, chapter 1, and look at verses 40 through 42.

One of the two who heard John speak, and followed Him, was Andrew, Simon Peter’s brother. He found first his own brother Simon, and said to him, “We have found the Messiah” (which translated means Christ). He brought him to Jesus. Jesus looked at him, and said, “You are Simon the son of John; you shall be called Cephas (which is translated Peter).

The word translated “looked,” describes a concentrated, intent gaze. This could be rendered, “Jesus not only looked at him, but He looked through him.”

Then Jesus Christ, exercising His authority over Simon, said, “I’m going to change your name.”

This was often done as a mark of some quality or characteristic that the person displayed. “I’m going to change your name to “rock,” meaning, “strong, steadfast, unmovable, consistent, controlled”!

It is no surprise that Peter did not say anything – he was speechless! And that is unique, for, as you know, Peter was constantly opening his mouth – if only to change feet.

Peter was anything but rock-like. Peter was the one prone to emotional outbursts; the one whose mouth became engaged before his brain; the one who would constantly battle with temper, ambition, and consistency.

Did he want to become Jesus' disciple? The real question was, "Did Simon really want to be radically changed?"

We have far too many "would be" disciples who excuse their personality and their inconsistency. Jesus Christ never offers any excuse for you – nor will He accept any from you! He does offer a radical exchange program, called "discipleship". In this program, you will have to own up to wrongs, failures, sins . . .

In 1992, the Texas educational bureaucracy reviewed and approved a new set of textbooks for the public school system. A group of parents, concerned about the information their children were coming home with, conducted their own review. They found 231 errors, including such "more-than-bloopers" as: Napoleon winning the battle of Waterloo, President Truman dropping the atom bomb on Korea, and General Douglas MacArthur leading the anti-Communist campaign in the 1950's (instead of Senator Joe McCarthy).

When called to account for these errors, the bureaucrats studied the texts again, and found more than the 231 errors the parents first found. Then, the parents found more. Finally, the tally stood at 5,200 mistakes in texts published by Prentice-Hall, Houghton Mifflin, and Rinehart and Winston.

How did the publishers react to this mess? One publisher's spokesperson argued that, "except for the errors," everyone agreed that these were the finest textbooks they had ever seen.

There is a part of discipleship that is uncomfortable. It is the exposure and revelation of needed change – in our character, in our personality, in our vocabulary, etc. Many people are never commissioned to feed sheep because they would never meet the Savior one-on-one before a campfire and allow Him to reveal their most fatal flaw.

The difficulty with Peter is that he had come to believe that he really was what the new name signified

– that he was a rock. Jesus was in the process of teaching him that, apart from His strength, Peter was a piece of crumbling sandstone.

So, Jesus Christ makes that painfully clear, as He goes back to Peter's old name of Simon, saying, "Simon, . . . do you love Me?"

The Second Response

Now, for the second response, go back to John, chapter 21 and look at the middle part of verse 16.

Yes, Lord; You know that I love [phileo] You.

The Second Command

Then Jesus gives the second command in the last part of verse 16.

Shepherd My sheep.

"Shepherd" is the word, "poimaino," meaning, "take care of," so Jesus is saying, "be a shepherd of My sheep". And these are little sheep – those not yet fully mature in their faith. So, "Watch over them, protect them, guide them, lead them."

The Third Question

Now look at verse 17a for the third and final question. There is an interesting change in words in this that the English translation cannot fully reveal.

He said to him the third time, "Simon, son of John, do you love [phileo] Me?"

The Lord uses Peter's word for "love," as He drops "agapao" and uses "phileo". It is a powerful moment as He says, "Peter, do you have deep affection for Me?"

Let me paraphrase and amplify this in order to convey what I believe is happening. It is as if the Lord is saying, "All right, Peter, the best you can offer Me is deep affection. I'm glad to hear you use the word affection, because we both know that, at this moment in your life, if you were to say you have an unwavering committed love for Me, you would just be bragging like old times. Well then, Simon, son of John, do you really have deep affection for Me?"

This question brought grief, I believe, because of a combination of two things:

- Jesus' change in words, with the meaning that I just gave in the paraphrased version,

struck Peter and humbled him all over again.

- Jesus asked him the question three times.

Look at the way scripture implies this in the middle of verse 17.

Peter was grieved because He said to him the third time, “Do you love Me?”

Three times Peter had denied the Lord, as Matthew, chapter 26, tells us:

- Verse 70b – . . . “I do not know what you are talking about.”
- Verse 72b – . . . “I do not know the man.”
- Verse 74a – . . . he began to curse and swear, “I do not know the man!”

Then, Luke’s gospel records, in chapter 22, verses 61 and 62, that Peter’s eyes looked across the courtyard just as Jesus looked toward Peter – and their eyes met. What an agonizing moment for Peter that was. He ran from the courtyard with bitter tears.

Now, three times, at this charcoal fire – haunting him, convicting him, breaking him – Jesus says, “Peter, do you love Me?”

It is interesting that Jesus could have asked Peter a thousand different questions; such as:

- “Peter, are you sorry for what you did?”
- “Peter, have you truly repented?”
- “Peter, are you willing to apologize?”
- “Peter, will you promise never to be unfaithful again?”

No! “Peter, do you love Me?”

That is the bottom line. And, isn’t that the bottom line to our own Christian experience?

- Sir, if you are being unfaithful to your wife, it is because you are not loving Jesus Christ.
- Student, if you are cheating on examinations, it is because you are not loving Jesus Christ.
- Friend, if you are angry due to mistreatment by others, it is ultimately because you have taken your eyes off Jesus Christ.

Do you know what we need to do? Stop praying so much that God will give us a greater love for our spouse, our kids, our house, our job, our ministry, and spend more time asking Him to give us a greater love for His Son, Jesus Christ.

All of these things are wonderful, but the best thing we could ever do is fulfill the greatest commandment ever given, as recorded in Matthew, chapter 22, verse 37, that,

. . . you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.

The Third Response

The third response is in the middle part of verse 17.

Lord, You know all things; You know that I love [phileo] You.

What a tremendous mark of growth this demonstrates in Peter. Before he would have tried to convince the Lord that He did not know what was in his heart, “Lord, let me tell You what my heart feels for You.”

Not now, however. He simply acknowledges the sovereign omniscience of Christ and says, “Lord, there isn’t anything about me that You don’t know. You know everything. You know that I have a deep affection for You.”

The Third Command

The third command follows in the last part of verse 17. Jesus tells Peter to,

Tend My sheep.

“Tend” is the Greek word “bosko,” meaning “feed,” and “sheep” is the word “probaton,” meaning “young lambs”.

It strikes me, as well, that Jesus could have told Peter a thousand things to do; such as,

- “Peter, build My church.”
- “Peter, evangelize the world.”
- “Peter, train leaders for the future.”
- “Peter, pray every day after I’m gone.”
- “Peter, memorize scripture regularly.”
- “Peter, be an example to the church.”

However, Jesus said, “Peter, I want you to take care of My sheep.”

It may involve everything else, but the priority is to see that the sheep do not go hungry.

The Characteristics of Brokenness

Jesus Christ is in the process of dedicating broken Peter to service.

I want to step from that warm fire and early morning conversation to where you and I live today. Frankly, Jesus Christ wants broken disciples now more than ever. What does brokenness look like? I sense that God has been working in my life – is this what He is accomplishing?

Let me make give you three characteristics of brokenness to help you.

Gaining the realization that Jesus Christ knows everything about you – and loves you still.

1. Characteristic number one is, being broken means coming to the realization that Jesus Christ knows everything about you – and loves you still.

Jesus knows the worst about you, and yet, He loves you.

One author brought out a wonderful thing about Christ's omniscience. If He did not know all things, you might fear that one day, something evil in you would spring up and startle God and turn His affection from you. He would say, "Oh, look at that horrible sin! I didn't know that was there. How terrible! This changes everything! I won't have anything more to do with you."

No, you can never surprise God!

And for Peter, it would be this sin of denial, as well as his bitter tears of confession that would mark the beginning of growth.

There is one other thing – since Jesus Christ knew everything about Peter, and He knows everything about us, then He knows everything we are becoming.

He can look at us and change our name to rock; merciful; compassionate; sincere; studious; caring; teachable; visionary . . .

Understanding that without supernatural change, you will never reflect the character of Christ.

2. Characteristic number two is, being broken means understanding that without supernatural change, you will never reflect the character of Christ.

We have to get over the idea that when we came to faith in Christ, we slightly resembled Him. We have to understand that God does not have to just polish a

few edges here and there, make a few changes and, "There you go – finished!"

I do not care how moral, upstanding, or educated you were when you became a Christian. It does not matter how clean your driving record was or how many of your kids made straight A's – you, nor I, did not look an inch like the Savior.

The Word of God informs us that when we trusted Christ alone for salvation, at that moment we became a child of God. Only then did we begin the process of conforming to the image of the Son, and we are still in the process of transforming.

My kids have little toys called the "transformers". When you buy them, transformers look like any normal robotic man. But then, my kids take them out of the package, twist their arms nearly off, tuck their heads into an opening in their chest, bend their legs behind their back – and they look like an eighteen wheeler! I am amazed! It did not look anything like a truck when it was in the package – but it has been transformed.

My friend, part of our problem in growing up spiritually is that we are really not convinced that much has to happen before we look like Christ! The truth is, our head, arms, legs, heart, mind, wishes, personalities have to be totally refashioned – we are talking about radical change!

Jesus Christ is not interested in ignoring your character flaws. He is not in the process of winking at your anger, your short temper; He is not sweeping under the royal carpet your unfaithfulness, your addiction, your lying. Stop making excuses! Own up to personal responsibility!

The inability to take proper responsibility was best illustrated by Tony Campolo. He referenced a TV commercial that is the classic laundry detergent commercial. The husband's shirt has terrible "ring around the collar". The dear wife tries everything, then bursts into tears at the newly washed shirt – still sporting that thick black line around the collar. Campolo then said, "You know, the ad never asks the obvious question, 'Why in the world doesn't her husband ever wash his neck?'"

Another illustration are letters asking for support from the welfare department. I read these recently and will share several of them with you.

- "I cannot get sick pay and I have six children . . . can you tell me why?"

- “Unless I get the money you send my husband, I will be forced to live an immortal life.”
- “In accordance with your instructions I have given birth to twins in the enclosed envelope.”
- And, here is a letter from a woman who writes in for financial support, “I am glad to report that my husband who is missing was found dead.”

Whew, I’ll bet she was a real swell wife.

Ladies and gentlemen, the bottom line to discipleship is this – if you want to grow in Him, you have to be willing to take responsibility for needed change; to have Him expose your sins, flaws, and weaknesses, that you would rather excuse; to allow Him to bring them right up to your face. Then, stand, kneel, or lie there – revealed and exposed – and allow Him to perform supernatural surgery, with just enough spiritual anesthesia to help you survive.

Being overwhelmed by your failure and, at the same time, His faithfulness; being humbled by your total lack and, at the same time, His total love

3. Characteristic number three is, being broken means being overwhelmed by your failure and, at the same time, His faithfulness; being humbled by your total lack and, at the same time, His total love.

After twenty years of blindness, George Matheson wrote:

*O Love that wilt not let me go,
I rest my weary soul on Thee;
I give Thee back the life I owe,
That in Thine ocean depths its flow
May richer, fuller be.*

Peter . . . broken . . . learning

Broken Peter is commissioned. What did he learn?

Compassion and concern

Did he learn compassion and concern for others?

Oh yes! I Peter, chapter 3, verses 8 and 9, clearly reveal these characteristics in Peter.

. . . let all be harmonious, sympathetic, brotherly, kind-hearted, and humble in spirit; not returning evil for evil, or insult for insult, but giving a blessing instead . . .

I Peter, chapter 5, verse 2, also displays his care for others.

shepherd the flock of God among you, exercising oversight not under compulsion, but voluntarily, according to the will of God; and not for sordid gain, but with eagerness

Humility

Did Peter learn the importance of humility?

Peter had said earlier, “Lord, everybody will fall away from You, but not me. I’m made out of better stuff. Nobody loves You like I love You!”

Later, Peter would write, in I Peter, chapter 5, verse 5b,

. . . and all of you, clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, for God is opposed to the proud, but gives grace to the humble.

That is another way of saying, “He gives grace to those who have been broken.”

Chuck Colson wrote,

The real legacy of my life was my biggest failure – that I was an ex-convict. My greatest humiliation – being sent to prison – was the beginning of God’s greatest use of my life. He chose the one experience in which I could not glory, for His glory.

Now, did Peter grow proud again, as he grew successful? As people looked to him and the other apostles, did he ever gloat and say, “Sure, I was unfaithful way back then, but now, I’m Peter the rock.”?

Well, the last recorded words Peter ever wrote, as recorded in II Peter, chapter 3, verse 18, were,

but grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To Him be the glory, both now and to the day of eternity. Amen.

Peter’s failures were not fatal, but he learned from being broken. And, when he was finally broken, he eventually understood what David learned, after his tragic fall, and wrote of in Psalm, chapter 51, verse 17,

The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and a contrite heart, O God, Thou wilt not despise.

Are you in the process of being broken? Is it like God is twisting your life around – pulling, pushing, bending?

The good news, if you can hear me through your pain, is that broken things, broken people are the special ones who have the maximum attention of God. They are the ones around God's charcoal fire; they are the ones singled out for instruction, learning, growing, and deepening.

C. H. Spurgeon once said, "We are at our spiritual best when we are shipwrecked on the island of God's sovereignty."

I want to close with the words of Vance Havner, who wrote,

God uses broken things. It is the broken alabaster box that gives forth perfume. It is the broken soil that produces a crop; it is the broken clouds that give rain; it is the broken grain that gives bread, and it is the broken bread that gives strength. . . . God uses broken things.

Would you lift your broken heart up to Him right now, as a sacrifice of surrender and submission? Will you say, in your heart,

"I am willing to be broken!

I am willing to change!

I am willing to be asked the most powerful question a human being can ever be asked, 'Do I really love You, Lord?'

I am willing to learn.

And, Lord, You know all things. You know everything about me – You know that I do love You!"