

The Power of Forgiveness

John 21 -

By Russell Muilenburg

Sunday, 25 April 2010 00:00

John 21:1-22 The Power of Forgiveness Man, I was so confused. I guess that's not a huge surprise. I'm usually confused. I never claimed to be the sharpest tool in the box, ya know? But I really screwed up, and what should have been the best time in my life—I mean, Jesus is alive, He's alive! What could be better than that?—it should have been the best time in my life, and instead I was just so lost...so sad...so guilty.

Man, I mean, think about this. Jesus rose from the dead, EXACTLY as he said he would—exactly, you see, as he *said*

, which is part of the problem, 'cause I never really paid attention to those parts of what he was saying, because I didn't even believe he would die, so why would I even think about him coming back to life?—but he did, exactly as he said he would.

He rose from the dead.

He left an empty tomb behind.

He appeared in person before us.

He showed his hands and sides to Thomas.

He invited us to touch him.

And I was astonished. Speechless. And I was so happy...I mean...I was so happy for him, and for the others, and for the whole world...and yet I was sick inside. I just hated myself.

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Oh man, I don't know if I can explain this. Have you ever felt like you'd completely blown it? Like you made a mistake so bad it could never be undone, like you'd crossed a line or somethin', like you'd done so much...stuff... that you couldn't ever be forgiven?

Well, that was me. I mean, that's the way I felt.

Here's the greatest news ever...the impossible has happened...God is here. God is in Jesus. And death is defeated. The greatest news ever...and I don't deserve to hear it.

I blew it. I gave up my right to be one of his followers. I denied him. Said I didn't know him. Three times, just like he said I would. Just like I promised I wouldn't. I rejected him to save myself. Do you understand that? They say it's at the time of crisis that the truth comes out, and I...I'm the one who swore he didn't know Jesus. I blew it. That's the truth about me.

And so, when Mary came that morning and told us the tomb was empty I ran as hard as I could, and I saw the empty grave, and I couldn't believe it. And that night, when we were all locked in that room—scared that they were going to come after us for stealing his body—and he appeared to us and I could see he was really alive...well, I was happy...of course...but I was something else too...I was ashamed. And a week later, when he came back, so that Thomas could see and believe, I just sort of hung back. I really didn't feel like I belonged. Like I had any right to belong to him.

And the last couple of weeks I've been in a sort of fog. Confused. Happy and sad at the same time. Feeling like an intruder. An outsider.

And then Mary said we should go to Galilee, and Salome and Joanna agreed. They said that an angel told them that Jesus would meet us there.

So we went. Everyone. All the disciples. A very happy band. So much chatter, so much singing. Laughing and dancing and dreaming about what Jesus would have us do next...and me: slouching along...the grump...lost in my own guilt.

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Man, by the time we got to Capernaum, I couldn't take it anymore. I had to do something! Something I could throw my weight into. Something familiar. Something where I wouldn't have to *think!*

So I said, "I'm going fishin'," and I ran away from the lot of them.

I had given my boat to my brother-in-law. He's a careful fisherman. Nets. Lines. Spears. Mast. Sail. Oars. It was all there, but he wasn't. And I didn't ask. I just checked the equipment and readied the boat and shoved off. And then, just as I was getting ready to go, here comes a group of disciples, not a thought in their head but to follow my lead.

So then, there were seven of us. In two boats. Doing the work we were so familiar with, out on the lake we knew so well.

We didn't talk much, which I was glad for. We just worked, all through the night.

But we didn't catch anything. Not that I minded. It was still good to be on the lake.

In the morning, I heard James calling from the other boat. "Simon. Simon. Let's go in."

And so, we folded our nets and stowed our gear and Andrew and I took the oars and we bent our backs and headed for the shore. And then, suddenly, Thomas—who was in the front of our boat—said, "Who's that?"

And we turned, and we looked, and we could see a man standing on the beach. He was tall, and sort of familiar, but in the morning light I couldn't tell who he was.

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He called out to us, “Friends, haven’t you any fish?” And James, in the other boat, yelled: “No!”

The man on the other shore called: “Cast your nets on the right side and you will find some.”

Right away, John stood up in his boat and swept his net open and cast it to the right. It sank for a moment...and just seemed to hang there...then it came to life, the water bubbling and splashing all around with fish.

James went crazy. He almost lost the lead lines when he cast his net. It, too, foamed up with fish. And Andrew cast in the same direction, and I did too, before we realized that each net was so heavy it would take at least two men to haul it in.

And then John was shouting something else. “Simon!” he was saying, “Simon. It’s Jesus! That’s the Lord on the shore!”

The word went through me like a sword, like a sweet, terrible pain. I looked through the morning haze and the glare of the sun and suddenly I could see every feature of his face. It was him! So I couldn’t hold still. I forgot all about the fish, and all about helping the others. I tied my work clothes to my waist and threw myself into the water and swam to shore as fast as I could.

Stupid! Stupid! There I was, all dripping wet and winded, standing there in front of Jesus, my friends still out in the boats struggling with all the fish...and I had no idea what to say. I just stood there. Feeling dumb.

Jesus had started a fire. Bread and fish were already laid on it, breakfast for one. He didn’t look at me. He looked to the boats still struggling shoreward. There were the ones who belonged to him, working and worthy—and here was I, idle and unworthy.

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When the boats finally made it to the shore, I couldn't get to them to help fast enough. There were so many fish—153 in all—all as large as any I had ever seen, and yet the nets weren't torn. We had to pull hard to get them all up onto shore.

Jesus said: "Bring some of the fish. Come and have breakfast with me."

We sat. Jesus sat among us. He served us one after the other. He served me last.

I couldn't eat.

And he didn't eat either. He just kept looking at me.

Those eyes—so bright and so piercing, like he could see into my very soul. The same eyes that I had seen in the courtyard, after I said I didn't know him. And now he kept looking at me.

I wanted to crawl away. I knew I didn't belong. Man...I would have left too, except that he spoke to me. He said: "Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?"

"Yes, Lord!" I think I shouted the answer. It came

immediately

, all on its own. "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you." Oh how I hoped he knew it!

But He didn't smile, didn't even blink. Quietly he said, "Feed my lambs."

Did he mean it? Was he granting me a place with him? Was that what he meant? Was I hoping too much? I was confused. I'm a fisherman. Not a shepherd. But before I could puzzle it out, he spoke again:

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“Simon, son of John, so you love me?”

The same words, the second time.

Carefully—because I

meant

it and I wanted him to believe that I meant it—I said, “Yes, Lord. You know that I love you.”

And he said, “Tend my sheep.”

Even then it wasn’t over. He kept looking at me. And now I knew what was coming, and it did come. For the third time he said, “Simon, son of John, do you love me?”

I bowed my head and I started to cry like a child. He was asking and he was telling, both. And it hurt. Because he knew. He knew. He knew how many times I said I did not even know him. He knew.

I couldn’t raise my face to him. I said, “Lord, you know everything. You know that I love you.”

There was a great silence after that. Someone was moving, but nobody said a thing.

And then I felt his hand on my shoulder. Jesus was kneeling in front of me. He took my chin and lifted my head, he looked into my eyes and there was such kindness there, and he said: “Feed my sheep.”

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Yes! Jesus was offering me a place in the kingdom. He was calling me one of his own. "Be a shepherd of my flock."

Yes, Lord! Yes!

And Jesus said: "Peter, when you were a young man, you used to fasten your own belt and go wherever you wanted to go. But when you grow old you will stretch out your hands and someone else will fasten a belt around you and take you where you don't want to go."

He said, "Do you understand?" and his look was filled with meaning. And I knew, I knew right then that he was giving me a glimpse of how I would die. And he was telling me that I was going to have another chance to keep my promise. He was telling me that the way I would die would glorify God.

I swallowed hard. I nodded my head. I understood.

So then he stood up, and he said to me all over again what he had said at the very beginning.

He said, "Follow me."

All of a sudden, I wasn't confused anymore. All of a sudden, I understood. Jesus is alive. And do you know what's even better than that? He gives another chance. Jesus' resurrection means there's hope for all of us. His coming back from the dead means that we can come back from our failures.

He brings us back. He restores us. His new life means new life for us.

And all he asks is that we follow him.

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