

Do-over

1 Peter 1:3-9 (NIV)

³ Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, ⁴ and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade. This inheritance is kept in heaven for you, ⁵ who through faith are shielded by God's power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time. ⁶ In all this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. ⁷ These have come so that the proven genuineness of your faith—of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed. ⁸ Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy, ⁹ for you are receiving the end result of your faith, the salvation of your souls.

Have you ever read one of those choose-your-own adventure books? They're set up to have a little bit of narrative, and then you have to make a choice that affects the rest of the story. Your choice sends you to a certain page where you see your decision play out. The beauty of this design was that if you found out that your decision put the heroes in danger or something worse, you could always flip back and make a different decision and then have it play out in a way that the hero wins.

The choose-your-own adventure lives on today. In my most favorite video game series, there are many of those kinds of choices you have to make, most creating different outcomes. I don't know how many times I made one decision thinking that this is the right thing to do, but then you find out you've been lied to, tricked, or it simply played out in a completely bad way. There's a moment of disappointment, but then I remember that I can just reload the game right before making that decision and make a different one, the "right one," to get the happy and good resolution I was trying to get. You get do-overs with choose-your-own adventure books and with video games with auto-save points, but you don't get those in real life. Wouldn't it be nice in life if you could flip back or reload to redo a decision that you regretted, on that turned out bad?

Imagine the thoughts that plagued Peter after his denial of Jesus three times on Good Friday. He had said to Jesus probably less than 12 hours before that he would never deny knowing Jesus, that he would rather die than to ever deny him. Then, in those early morning hours, Peter was asked, "You aren't one of this man's disciples too, are you?" "I think this man was with the Nazarene." "Yes, you were with him. You are one of his disciples. Your accent gives it away."

Peter has just a split second to decide how to answer. He makes his choice. "No, no I'm not. I don't know the man. I swear to God, I don't know this Nazarene. May God cast me into the fiery pits of hell if I'm lying, but I've never been with him. I'm certainly not his disciple." After he responded this way the third time, the rooster crowed. Jesus looked right at him. Was it sadness in Jesus' eyes? Was it disappointment? Peter remembered the words that Jesus told him that he would this very night Peter would deny knowing him three times. He broke down, ran out of the courtyard, and wept bitterly. If only he could have a do-over.

It's just like that time when you said what you thought needed to be said in the moment. It wasn't the kindest way to say it, but you said it. Then you saw how it all played out, how badly your words were taken. You regretted your words. If only you could go back and say it differently, say it in some other way so that the message was heard the way you meant it to be heard. But it's too late. What's said is said, as messy as it was. You don't get a do over.

You get an urge to call someone. You haven't spoken to them in a while. Maybe there was something keeping you two apart, some unresolved issue. Maybe you just kept telling yourself that you're busy with all the other things going on in life and you don't have the time to contact this person even though you knew you could make the time. You knew you should have called, but then something happens. Maybe they get sick. Maybe they end up in the hospital. Maybe worse. You never get to have that conversation that you knew you should have. If only you could go back, turn back time, have a do-over, do what you should have done.

Are you living in regret of the past? Do the things you said or didn't say, the things you did or didn't do, do they weigh on your mind so much that you can't really even think about or process anything else? Do you feel that in what you said - now seeing how badly it played out - that you failed, that you failed the Lord? Do you feel like Peter where you did the very thing Jesus warned you not to do? You knew you weren't supposed to say angry or hurtful words to someone, but you couldn't help from them spilling over your lips and on to that person's ears. Did the focus on your own life cause you to push others out, that you could have let them know that you love them and care for them, but now that time is over and you can't get it back? Have you failed the Lord by not loving your neighbor as yourself?

These opportunities, these relationships, were put into our lives so that we could put our faith into practice, to love these people the way that God loves us. Yet, I didn't do it. I failed. I am overwhelmed with the regret and grief of failing my Lord, of failing others. The tests that he put before me, these opportunities to serve others and love them as Jesus did, I passed them up. What value is my faith? What worth is it? Is it even genuine? Am I a Christian, or just someone who likes to think that they are? God, can I please have a do-over?

Sadly, we can't just turn back the pages in our lives. There are no auto-save and load points. There are no do-overs. We say the wrong thing or do the wrong thing, and we have to live with it. That grief, that guilt, that regret, of failing to serve people, of failing to show them the love that God has shown us, this can make us feel like total failures. How do we live with the things we have done wrong, the things we have left undone?

You know that Peter was painfully asking himself the same questions on Good Friday, Holy Saturday, and Easter Sunday. How could he live with himself with what he had done? He didn't have an answer, but God did.

On Easter Sunday morning after hearing the women's report, Peter ran to Jesus' tomb and found it empty. Something had happened here. Peter left confused and ponderings. Although the specific instance is not recorded, we learn from both Luke and the Apostle Paul that on that very first Easter Sunday, sometime between when Jesus appeared to the women and before he appeared to the disciples in the locked room, Jesus appeared to Peter – just the two of them. Jesus purposefully went to Peter first of his close 12 disciples to give him an answer of how Peter could live with himself after what he had done. Jesus, much like he did for Thomas, probably showed Peter the nail marks. He probably let Peter touch him. Maybe he said, "Peter, place your faith, your worth, in me, not in decisions you have made, decisions you rightfully regret." The risen Lord showed Peter that his sins had been paid for. Peter was forgiven. He can serve the Lord again in spite of his denials.

Peter understood the message and took it to heart. That's why he wrote, "Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead." (verse 3) Jesus' resurrection was proof that he had been forgiven. God gave Peter a new life in his forgiveness made certain by Jesus' resurrection. He was restored. In God, he had a new birth into a living hope, a new start. God did not hold Peter's denials against him because he had paid for them. God gave Peter a new future to look forward to instead of dwelling on the regrets of the past.

This is the message that Peter passes on to us. Peter didn't know any of us personally, but he knew that we would all make mistakes, that we would all mess up and fail our Lord like he did. He knew what it meant to live with guilt and grief and regret over things done in the past. That's why he announces at the very beginning of his letter to us that we have a new birth, a new start, a living hope that endures.

Jesus' resurrection from the dead means a new beginning for us. It's not a do-over, but it's a new start. God has forgiven all our sins, all the things from our past that we have done wrong, the things that we beat ourselves up about. God makes us new, not holding our failures and guilt and regret against us. By his resurrection from the dead, we know that Jesus in fact accomplished his mission to forgive all the failures, all the sins, all the guilt, all the regret that we hold on to. No longer do you have to look back on the past and wish you could change what you did. God has given us new birth into a living hope. He has not treated us as our failures deserve. He made us new through this message. He made us new through our baptisms. He washed us clean in his blood. God gave each of us a new birth, a new start, to serve the Lord, to live for him. It's not a do-over, but it is a new life.

So, what do we do from here? Don't beat yourself up any longer for whatever failures or regrets you have in life. Look to the cross to know that those are paid for. Look to the empty tomb to realize that because Jesus lives, God has given us a new birth into a living hope. He has given us an inheritance that can never perish, spoil, or fade. Stop looking to the past and dwelling on your failures and look ahead to what God in his great mercy has given you. Look ahead to your future, to what you will receive because God has given you a new birth to believe that God has saved you. He will shield you in this faith that he gave you until you live that inheritance that he has given you.

By Jesus' resurrection, by your baptism, God have given you a new birth into a living hope. Today, look ahead to what you have in Jesus. "Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy, for you are receiving the end result of your faith, the salvation of your souls." (verses 8-9) Amen.