

THE FOUR STEPS OF COMING BACK WITHOUT FALLING BACK (Luke 22:54-62; John 21:15-19)

When I was a youth, the show *Charlies Angels* was a big hit. Do you remember that show? Many young men back then had a poster of Farrah Fawcett hanging on their bedroom wall. I had a poster hanging on my bedroom wall, but it wasn't Farrah Fawcett or any other popular pinup girl of the day. I didn't for two reasons. One, I don't think my mother would have approved, and rightly so. Two, at that time in my life I was more interested in sports than girls.

The poster I did have pinned to my wall was of an NFL quarterback, but he wasn't just any quarterback. They come and go with great regularity. This man was an icon, a hero. I idolized him in a good way because he was a man of spiritual depth. He was committed to his wife and his family. He was also a fierce competitor.

During his junior year he won the Heisman Trophy as the best player in collegiate football. He would have been drafted #1 were it not for the fact that he graduated from the Naval Academy which meant he owed the Navy four years of service. He spent the second of his four years in Vietnam.

The Dallas Cowboys took a gamble and drafted him in the 10th round of the 1964 draft even though he wouldn't actually graduate until 1965 and wouldn't be eligible until 1969.

He was a 27-year-old rookie when he entered the NFL that year in '69. His coach, Tom Landry, didn't believe in starting rookie quarterbacks, and the first string QB led the Cowboys to the first Super Bowl appearance during this man's second season. He won the starting position midway through his third season, and promptly won a string of ten straight games, capping it with the Dallas Cowboys first Super Bowl victory. He retired after the 1979 season as the highest rated quarterback in the history of the NFL up until that time.

He was the Dallas Cowboys quarterback before Dak Prescott, Tony Romo, Troy Aikman, and Danny White. He came after Eddie LeBaron, Dandy Don Meredith, and Craig Morton. His name was Roger Staubach, but he had several nicknames—Roger the Dodger, Captain America, and he was also known as Captain Comeback. During his tenure as the quarterback for the Dallas Cowboys, he orchestrated 23 come-from-behind victories in the 4th quarter. Fourteen of those victories came either in the final two minutes or in overtime.

There is something inspiring about a sport's team or an individual athlete who makes a dramatic comeback. But there are other kinds of comebacks. It happens in the business world, the political arena, and even in the world of fashion.

Let me ask you, is there some kind of comeback you need to make? Maybe your marriage isn't what it could be or once was; you need to make a **marital comeback**. Have you had a falling-out with your children or your parents? You need to launch a **family comeback**. Has your business or your savings account taken a nose-dive? You

need to have a **financial comeback**. Have you had health problems of late? You need a **health comeback**? Our church is not as strong numerically as we once were. I trust the Lord is doing a work among us, and we will see a **congregational comeback**.

Today, however, I want to concentrate on what I think is the most important of all. As a prelude to that, let me ask, “Is your relationship with the Lord what it should be or even once was? Was there a time in your life when you were closer to the Lord than you now are? Have you allowed sin or a certain habit to take root in your life and it serves to keep you from making progress in your walk with the Lord?” If the answer to any of those questions is “yes,” you need to experience a **spiritual comeback**.

Let me offer you a word of warning. Just like many sports teams rally to catch up with their opponent, but then they stumble and they fall back before the game ends. Likewise, many Christians experience an abbreviated comeback. They work to get back to where they should be, but then they lose their focus. They get entangled with the world, and they fall back.

Today, we are going to look at an individual who desperately needed to make a comeback. His name was Peter. Jesus gave Peter the opportunity to make a comeback, but He was also careful to instruct Peter on how to keep from falling back. Today’s message will focus on, “The Four Steps of Coming Back without Falling Back.” We are going to look at two passages of Scripture. The first passage shows us how Peter fell and how he started to come back. The second passage completes his come back and goes on to show him and us how to keep from falling back.

Let’s begin by looking at Luke 22:54-62. Just hours earlier, Peter boasted that though all others might desert Jesus, he would not. Jesus warned Peter he would deny Christ three times (vv. 32-34). It happened just as Jesus said it would. As Jesus was being transferred from one trial to another, Peter denied Jesus the third time, the rooster crowed, Peter looked up, and he made eye contact with Jesus. As he did so, the realization of what he had just done stabbed his heart. He left that scene, went off by himself and wept tears of remorse. That brings us to the first point.

Step #1: Confess Your Sin.

Admit your failure. Allow yourself to feel the weight of your guilt. The word *confess* literally means, “to speak the same thing as.” When a person makes a true confession, he/she speaks and feels about his/her sin the same way God does. God views our sin very seriously. God is not a permissive parent who says to us after we sin, “Well, I’m sure you didn’t really mean it.” Our sin was serious enough that God had to judge His own Son and pour out His wrath against His Son in order to make a way for us to be forgiven.

True confession is more than simply acknowledging that we have sinned. To truly repent, one must feel his/her sin. That is what the Bible calls *conviction*. Conviction is the work of the Holy Spirit. It is **not** the job of the preacher or anybody else to lay a guilt trip on someone. Once the Spirit does the work of conviction in a person’s heart, then that person can see and feel his sinfulness, and that person can truly confess his/her sin. That is what Peter experienced.

There was an earlier time in Peter's life when he came face to face with his sinfulness. In Luke 5 Jesus urged Peter and his fishing companions to put their boat out in the deep water and to let down their fishing nets. Peter complained that they had fished all night and not caught anything, but he relented. When they followed Jesus' command, they caught such a huge school of fish their nets began to break under all the weight.

There was something else breaking under great weight. It was Peter's heart under the weight of his sin. Peter said in Luke 5:8, "Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man!" I like the way the Cotton Patch version renders that verse: "Don't waste your time on a bum like me." Jesus didn't go away. He chose to spend much time with Peter, and when you get over to the book of Acts, you discover that all that time was not wasted. But when Peter denied his Lord that third time, I am sure he felt as though Jesus had wasted His time. Peter keenly felt his failure.

Have you ever failed? There are all kinds of failure. Some of us know what it is to fail **academically**. We didn't plan on it, but that course or courses were harder than we realized, and we didn't study like you should have. Some of us have failed **morally**. We crossed lines we said to ourself we wouldn't cross. Some of us have failed **spiritually**. We've tried to read our Bible daily and spend time each day praying, but we haven't been consistent. Some of us have given up altogether.

This book is full of people who have failed. You can count on one hand, and have several fingers left over the number of people who followed God but didn't end up failing God in some way or another. Failure is a universal reality, but it need not be final. Failure doesn't have to have the last word. You can come back.

In his little book, *Home Town Tales*, Philip Gulley, a Quaker minister, recounts a childhood experience of his while attending Saint Mary's Catholic Church with his mother and four other siblings.

One Sunday morning as my mother was deep in prayer, I slipped from the pew, went next door [to] the gas station, and spent my offering money on penny candy. I made it back just in time for Father McLaughlin's sermon, which was about a husband and a wife who had lied to the church and spent their offering money on themselves. When they walked into the church, God struck them dead. As I was listening, the Tootsie Rolls congealed in my stomach, an immovable mass, a testament to sin and disobedience. I fell to my knees beside my mother, endeavoring to pray my sorry soul out of perdition. Though I have prayed many times since that day, I can't recall another time I beseeched the Lord with such passion.

Later that afternoon, I confided my sin to my brother Glenn, who pointed out that God often waits to smite us until we are sleeping. This, he explained, is why the devil never sleeps. This seemed consistent with what I already knew to be true; I had once heard a TV preacher thunder that the devil never slept. And that night, neither did I. I lay awake repeating over and over again the phrase, "I love Jesus. I love Jesus. I love Jesus," hoping God would think twice before killing someone with such sweet praise on his lips.

When morning dawned, I prized the tender mercies of God as never before. And I have, since that time, believed with all my being that were I to stray from God's house to sin, the pathway home would lead always to an open door. Such deep consolation does faith provide.

God longs for His wayward children to come home. He wants us to come home, not so He can judge us, but so that He can love us. But for us to come home, we must confess our failure, our sin.

The question we must answer is not, "Have I failed?" You know you have. The question is, "Am I going to own up to it and request God's forgiveness and grace?"

Step #2: Declare Your Love.

Let's fast forward to John 21:15-19. By this time Jesus has risen from the grave, and He has met with His disciples at least once. He now comes appears to them another time. The scene is somewhat reminiscent of that time He called them in Luke 5. They have been fishing all night without catching anything. He calls from the shore. They confess their fishing expedition has been fruitless. Jesus urges them to throw their nets on the other side of the boat. At this point they have not recognized it is Jesus standing on the shore. They comply with the stranger's instruction, and once again, their nets are loaded down with fish. John perceptively realizes that it is Jesus standing on shore. He confides this to Peter. Immediately, Peter jumps into the water and swims to shore.

When Peter and the other disciples arrive, they discover Jesus has started a fire and is cooking them breakfast. Look specifically at John 21:9. There is only one other place in the Bible where you will find a fire described like this one. Look at John 18:18. It was around a fire that Peter denied Jesus, and now it is around a fire that Jesus will give Peter an opportunity to come back. Jesus gives Peter that second chance by allowing Peter to affirm and declare his love for Jesus. Just as Peter denied Jesus three times, Jesus asks Peter three times whether Peter loves Jesus.

Jesus' question in v. 15 was somewhat open-ended. More than what? More than the fishing gear? Some people need to ask themselves whether they love Jesus more than their occupation or more than their hobby? Or was Jesus asking, "Peter do you love me more than you love your companions?" Do you love your family or your friends more than you love Jesus? Probably, Jesus was asking Peter, "Do you love me more than these other disciples love me? You said you would stick by Me even if everyone else deserted Me, and then you denied Me."

Peter had learned his lesson. He chose not to compare himself to anybody else. Don't compare your love for Jesus with anyone else's. Instead, compare your love for Jesus today with how much you loved Jesus last year or last Fall or last month or even last week. Our love for Jesus should grow daily. Is your love growing?

In Revelation 2, Jesus took the Church at Ephesus to task because they had left their first love. They had fallen back because they had fallen out of love for the Lord.

Vince Lombardi, the legendary coach of the Green Bay Packers, once commented on

what it takes to build a winning team. He said, “If you’re going to play together as a team, you’ve got to care for one another. You’ve got to love each other.”

If Liberty Southern is going to be a winning church, we must love one another. But we will not be able to love one another as we ought until we first love Jesus as we should.

If you need to come back, and if you are going to keep from falling back, pledge your love to the Lord. Make sure your love for Him grows each day.

Step #3: Obey God’s Call.

Each time Peter affirmed His love for Jesus, Jesus gave Him a word of instruction (vv. 15-17). Each word of instruction had to do with shepherding his fellow brothers and sisters, God’s sheep. One sure way to keep from falling is to get your eyes off yourself and how you can please yourself and start focusing on others and how you can serve them.

During the Last Supper before Jesus warned Peter that he would deny Him, He told Peter, “And when you have turned back, strengthen your brothers.” One positive outcome of falling back and then coming back is that you can teach your fellow believers not to fall back. That is what David promised to do when he repented and pleaded for God’s forgiveness. He promised, “I will teach transgressors Your ways” (Psalm 51:13). Instead of complaining about our problems, we need to look for someone else who is having a difficult time and do what we can to serve them and help them.

Let me read you one more story from Philip Gulley. This comes from his chapter, “Fussing, Fighting, and Forgiving,” in his book, *Home Town Tales*.

I was fired from the first church I ever pastored. I had been there three months when an elderly woman asked a theological question about the end times. I told her my honest opinion, which must have been the wrong thing to do; the next Sunday they held a meeting to talk about firing me. They told me if I changed my mind, I could keep my job. I asked them why they would want a pastor who surrendered his convictions just to keep his job. I started to resign but wasn’t quick enough, and they fired me.

That very afternoon I got a phone call from another church to be their pastor. The next Sunday I went to preach a trial sermon. I didn’t want to be their pastor because they were a fundamentalist church, and I didn’t want to get fired again when they found out what I thought about the end times. So, I preached a liberal sermon in hopes they wouldn’t hire me. The congregation sat in the pews and squirmed. Except for one dear, sweet, elderly woman who smiled broadly and said, ‘Amen!’ I found out later she was hard of hearing.

After worship, they tromped downstairs to talk about whether they should hire me. I sat upstairs in the meeting room and listened through the heating vent. Their initial comments were not promising. I was grateful my mother wasn’t there to hear what they were saying about me. But then someone mentioned how maybe God had sent me their way so I could learn a little something. They quieted down

and thought about that for a while. Then a man named Dick said, “I think we ought to hire him.” Dick had moved to the country after his retirement. He was a big man who brooked no nonsense.

A few minutes later, I heard Dick tramp up the stairs. He sat down on the pew beside me. “We’ve reached agreement,” he reported. “We’ve agreed that none of us liked your sermon. We’ve also agreed to call you to be our pastor.”

I went out to the car, where my wife was waiting. “How did it go?” she asked me. “Bad news,” I told her. “They hired me.”

That afternoon the phone rang. It was Dick, asking me if I would play golf with him. I was a little put out with him since he had criticized my sermon. I figured I could pay him back by thrashing him in a game of golf. We met the next morning at the golf course and played nine holes. Dick beat me by ten strokes. Afterward, when he was loading my clubs into the trunk of his car, he shook his head and laughed, “A preacher who can’t preach or golf. What have we gotten ourselves into?”

Then he took me back to his house for lunch. I met his wife, Katie, a tender, considerate woman.

Dick and I became fast friends. When I preached a sermon he didn’t like, I was always the first to know. We golfed once a month. I never beat him. Then his elderly mother died, and I conducted her funeral. It was about then that Dick started liking my sermons. I never did figure out if it was because I was changing or because Dick was.

I stayed in that little church for four years. When I left, they gave me a book full of letters about what I meant to them. I sat downstairs in the meeting house basement and read it and cried. Wonderful, wonderful, wonderful people.

Then next year I was at the hospital, visiting someone in my new church. I saw Dick walking down the hall; he was crying. His Katie had died. Dick asked me if I could give her funeral, just as I’d said words over his mother. I have a rule about not going back to a former church to do funerals or weddings, but I couldn’t bring myself to tell Dick no. Five years before, he’d taken a chance on me, and I figured that put me in his debt.

A couple of years later, I got a phone call from a lady in my old church. She told me Dick had cancer. By then I had children and a busier life. I went by to see Dick once, but he wasn’t there. He died a few months later, before I could see him again to tell him how much he’d meant to me. His sons asked me to conduct his funeral. I broke my rule again and agreed to do it.

At the funeral I talked with some folks about how Christians these days can’t seem to get along. How we fuss and fight and draw our theological lines in the sand. I told them how Dick and I were poles apart sometimes, but we’d made up our minds that disagreeing about God would never keep us from loving God’s children. It’s good to know where you stand, but it’s even better to have your heart turned toward gentleness.

Is your heart turned toward gentleness? If it is, you will truly endeavor to shepherd one another.

One pastor had a customary way of dismissing his congregation each Sunday. Week in and week out, his parting words were, "Take good care of each other this week." If we will do a god job of taking care of one another each week, we will go a long way in preventing ourselves from falling back.

In order to come back and not fall back, we need to **confess** our sin, **declare** our love, **obey** God's call, and finally . . .

Step #4: Accept God's Will.

Notice vv. 18-19. Church tradition tells us that Peter was crucified. Peter did not feel worthy to die in the manner that His Lord had; so, he requested to be crucified upside down. According to John, Jesus said what He did about Peter stretching out his hands and being led to where he didn't want to go to indicate that Peter would die an unnatural death. His concluding remark was, "Follow Me." If we are going to stay close to Jesus and keep from falling back, we must let Him make known His will and then follow it regardless of where His will leads us.

Are you living in obedience to God's will? You can't live in disobedience to His will and keep from falling back.

The fact that God's will is best is illustrated in what happened when Jesus called out to His disciples to throw their nets on the other side of the boat. All night long those experienced, professional fisherman had been fishing their own way and came up empty. Then, suddenly, a land-lubbing stranger tells those men to throw their nets to the starboard side of the boat. They did so, and they brought in an incredible haul.

Whose instructions and will are you going to follow? Your own? The world's? Your family's? Your friend's? Or Christ's? If you are going to keep from falling back, you must accept His.

Brothers and sisters, lets **confess** our sin, **declare** our love, **obey** His call, and **accept** His will.

What's your need this morning? Do you need to come back? Or are you in danger of falling back? I've got good news. The Christian faith is an Easter religion. It is all about starting over and beginning again. God wants you to have a new start. He wants you to come back and to keep from falling back. He will help you do both if you will trust Him by entrusting yourself to Him. Do so today.