

Facing Failure with God

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Though I don't know for sure, I would imagine that one of the most unpleasant words in any language is the word for failure. This is particularly true in a society that is as achievement-oriented as the modern-day United States. Back when I was in elementary school, it always bugged me that grades didn't go A-B-C-D-E. Instead, as we all know, F brought up the rear, because F stood for failure. Americans will do just about anything to avoid the "failure" label.

And yet, for all of our fear of failure, every one of us sooner or later comes to a point where we hear that mean little voice inside our heads telling us that we've failed. To be a failure, as a parent, a spouse, a provider, a worker, a student, or a Christian is the last thing that any one of us wants to be, and yet, sometimes that's who we believe we are. What do we do then, when we are mired in the depths of misery, self-loathing, and despair? Thankfully, as Christians, we serve a God who is perhaps most relevant in the worst times of our lives. Let's consider facing failure with God.

Failure in the Bible

Failure is a solitary place to be. When we believe that we have failed, we inevitably start to believe that we are worse than everybody else, that nobody is as big a screw-up as we are. In reality, the experience of failure is a common one, and it is one that we share with the greatest heroes of faith in the Bible. It's easy to zip right by those little indicators of despair in the text, but they are certainly there, in every dimension that failure can assume in our own lives today.

For example, there are several places in Scripture where people experience **MATERIAL** failure. Consider, for instance, the devastating story recorded in Job 1:13-19. I don't think anybody can read this without feeling sorry for poor Job. This is a man who was a wise businessman, so much so that he became one of the wealthiest men in the land of Uz. He lived a life of humble, thankful righteousness, and he even offered sacrifices every week to propitiate God in case one of his children had done something to invite divine wrath. And then, wham! He loses everything, wealth, children, and eventually even his own health. The very disaster he had tried so diligently to prevent had overtaken him, and soon after, his three closest friends show up to tell him it's all his fault because he was a bad person.

Even though I don't think any of us have ever had the hammer dropped on us like Job did, many of us have experienced enough material difficulty that we can understand his pain. It is an awful, awful feeling not to be able to protect and provide for our loved ones. I can well remember the time I've spent in my life looking for work and not finding it. Thankfully, I didn't have any "helpful" friends or family members who pinned the blame on me, but I was perfectly capable of accusing myself, that if only I worked harder or did better in interviews or somehow became a better person, I wouldn't be in this fix. That feeling of wretched helplessness doesn't bear thinking about!

And yet, that misery pales in comparison to **SPIRITUAL** failure. Imagine, if you will, that you were in a place where you hadn't just sinned, but you'd sinned big, the kind of sin that becomes a public humiliation, that will permanently damage your family and your place in the world. We think of catastrophic sin like that as the province of bad people, but it really isn't. Consider, for instance, David, so famously a man after God's own heart, who nonetheless found himself caught up in adultery and murder. God solemnly promised him that the effects of his sin would never go away, that they would haunt him for as long as he lived. We see David's reaction in Psalm 51:3-5.

This is a terrible place to land. We know that nothing in this earthly life is certain, that sometimes bad things happen to good people. However, we also know that when we sin, nobody else made us sin. Sure, Satan tempted us, but we were his willing accomplices, and because we were foolish and evil, we brought disaster on ourselves and our loved ones. At that point, it can be easy to give up, to say, "I've trashed my life anyway; I'm not going to bother trying to serve God any longer because I'm never going to get out of this spiritual hole." The problems with sin that were so hard to see beforehand become hideously obvious in hindsight, but life doesn't give do-overs, and we have to deal with it.

That's hard to go through in person, but sometimes it's even worse to deal with the failure of **OTHERS**. Consider with me the incident recorded in Ezra 9:1-4. Ezra had personally experienced the misery of the Babylonian captivity. He knew that God allowed His people to be carried into slavery because of their sin. He was humbly thankful for the opportunity to return to the land of his fathers, to rebuild the temple of the Lord, and he was personally committed to serving God in righteousness all the days of his life. Imagine his horror, then, when he finds that the other returned captives have begun to practice the same sins that had caused them to be led into captivity in the first place! He loves his people; he loves his nation, and here they are, walking down the same disastrous road!

I've learned a lot of lessons in the years I've spent preaching the gospel, but one of the bitterest is that sometimes, brethren whom I love are going to put their souls in horrific danger, and there's not a thing I can do about it. I can encourage, I can warn, but I can't stop people from doing what they want to, even if the result will be disastrous. None of us can, with any of our loved ones. But boy, is that hard to watch while it's happening! Nor can we flip a switch and stop caring about people simply because they're making terribly bad decisions. Instead, as they're going over the cliff, some part of us is along for the ride, and even though we know better, somehow we do feel responsible, like we have failed.

One of the most difficult subsets of this is when loved ones refuse to **LISTEN** to the gospel. Paul describes how he faced this situation in Romans 9:1-3. This was a tremendous source of anguish for first-century Jewish Christians. They recognized, correctly, that Jesus was the Messiah, the promised King for whom their people had been waiting for a thousand years. They saw Jesus do miracles to prove His deity; many of them could work miracles themselves. The message of the gospel was clear and easily comprehensible. And yet, as a whole, the Jewish nation chose to reject that gospel rather than hear it. How that must have frustrated Paul! How he must have wondered what he was doing wrong!

Even today, that experience is every bit as frustrating and misery-inducing. I suspect that just about all of us have people in our lives whom we love with all our hearts, but whom we can't persuade to obey the gospel. We make all these arguments that seem so clear and convincing to us, but they have all the impact of shooting a slingshot at an M-1 tank! We know that they could save their souls if only they would listen, but listen is exactly what they won't do.

I bring all of these things up not to lead us on a journey of the failures of our lives, but to remind us that in these things, we are not alone. We may be stuck in a situation that seems intolerable to us, but we can find somebody in the Bible who was stuck in a worse one. If they made it through, we can too, and that is a reassuring thought!

Jesus and Failure

Clearly, just about every person who gets much ink in the Bible had to face some kind of failure. This is true both for the characters we associate with some failure, like David and Bathsheba, and those we do not. Before the Lord's Supper, we're going to explore the foremost example of the second kind. We're going to consider Jesus and failure.

It is true that there were many things that were important to Jesus that He succeeded at. Obviously, He perfectly fulfilled His role as sacrifice for the sins of mankind. However, there were other things that were nearly as important to Him that didn't go the way He wanted. He came to seek and save the lost, but most of the lost didn't listen.

This was true even of His own **DISCIPLES**. Read with me from John 6:66-67. Here, we see Jesus surrounded by one of the largest crowds of His ministry. A little earlier in this chapter, they were so impressed with Him that they wanted to take Him by force to make Him King. However, as soon as He said something to them that they didn't understand and didn't like, they turned their backs on Him. The Master went from an audience of thousands to an audience of twelve. We hear an echo of how much this bothered Jesus in His sarcastic question to Peter.

Today, numbers matter to us too. We like to look up at this board in the front and see high attendance and high contribution. When they aren't that way, some part of us starts to ask what's going wrong. Sometimes, declines have nothing to do with the gospel at all—for instance, in the past two years, 19 people who used to attend here have moved too far from here to attend any longer, and in a congregation this size, that'll make a dent. Even when that's not the case, though, even when some turn their backs on the gospel, that's nothing more than Jesus Himself had to face. If we are preaching the same gospel that He did, we have no reason to expect better results than He got.

This same reaction was common within Jesus' **FAMILY** as well. Consider the exchange recorded in John 7:3-5. As if the rejection Jesus got from those who claimed to be His disciples weren't enough, He got the same thing from His brothers. You would think that if anybody would recognize the truth about Jesus, it would have been those who knew Him best, but apparently the opposite was true. They couldn't look past their sibling to see the Son of God.

This is an all-too-familiar experience to us too. It is often true that the non-Christians who are closest to us, who are the people we most want to see obey the gospel, are the same ones who are least likely to listen. This is certainly the case in my life. My own family is my most critical and least receptive audience, and that's true even of the ones who are Christians. It's much easier to teach a Biblical truth to this whole congregation than it is to teach only one of them. When we have trouble teaching our loved ones, then, we should recognize that for the universal experience it is.

Jesus failed to persuade others to turn to Him even when He employed **MIRACLES**. This is evident from the story of Mark 3:4-5. To us, it seems that miracles ought to be the ultimate argument. If we could work miracles, everybody would obey the gospel, right? Not so. From beginning to end, the whole Bible is a testament to the shortcomings of the persuasive power of miracles. Take these Pharisees. They knew that Jesus was healing the sick, they knew that He couldn't possibly do that apart from God, but they rejected Him because of when He was doing it. Their steadfast adherence to the traditions of the elders led them to dismiss every miracle that Jesus ever worked. To us, that boggles the mind. It probably boggled Jesus' mind too, but He had to deal with it every day of His ministry.

Today, it can be equally frustrating when we fail to persuade others using God's word. After all, the Scripture is the only miracle directly available to us today, we generally know how to use it, and it testifies quite clearly on the divinity of Jesus, the steps of salvation, and many other equally important topics. We think that as long as someone's willing to study the Bible with us, that we'll easily persuade them, but it doesn't work that way. Somebody who doesn't want to believe that baptism is necessary for the forgiveness of sins won't believe it, even if we show them a dozen passages that could not be more plain. Not even a sword as sharp as God's word will succeed in piercing every heart.

This is why Jesus reacted the way He did during the **TRIUMPHAL ENTRY**. Let's look at Luke's account in Luke 19:41-44. We usually think of the triumphal entry as this big, glorious, happy event, but to Jesus, at least, that's not

the way it was. He knew that it marked the end of His ministry. In less than a week, He was going to be dead. Certainly, He wasn't anticipating the cross with joy, but that's not what has Him upset. Instead, He knows that He has now run out of opportunities to persuade the Jewish nation to listen to Him. This would have been terribly hard. One of the toughest positions we can be in is to be the parent of a knucklehead kid who won't listen to anybody and insists on destroying his life. Typically, parents don't have to go through that for more than 50 years or so. On the other hand, Jesus has been involved with Israel ever since the promise to Abraham, 2000 years ago. Throughout almost all of that time, they've been disobedient and disappointing. Here, they're about to hit the final disappointment, and Jesus has a hard time with that.

We reach **THE POINT** of all of this in Hebrews 12:3. In context, the Hebrews writer is clearly talking about the hostility that sinners showed Jesus when they crucified Him, but the Scripture has a wider application than simply that. Jesus wasn't simply abused in the body. He endured equal suffering in His mind, His heart, and His spirit, and much of the latter suffering occurred before His crucifixion. Here He was, the only begotten Son of God, the greatest teacher the world has ever seen, endowed with miraculous power, and He couldn't get the people of one postage-stamp nation in the Middle East to believe in Him, even though they had been warned to expect His coming for centuries. It's true that most of us will never experience the same level of physical suffering that He endured, but it's equally fair to say that none of us will face the same level of disappointment either. Jesus knew from the very beginning that His people would reject Him. That didn't make it any easier to take when they did, but He endured the disappointment as He did the pain.

As we prepare to partake of the Lord's Supper, there are two lessons we can draw from this. First, we must remember that Jesus faced this rejection for our sakes. Had His people not turned against Him, He would never have died for our salvation. Second, if Jesus kept going despite the massive discouragement He received from basically everybody, we can do the same. We owe it to Him to persevere as His disciples and not lose heart, in the midst of failure or even disaster. Let's reflect on these things now as we share in the Lord's Supper.

What to Do

In the final portion of our lesson this morning, we're going to consider what we should do when we encounter disappointment and failure. For our inspiration, we're going to take the same four gloomy examples that we looked at in the first part of this lesson. After all, we don't remember Job, David, Ezra, and Paul because they let their adverse circumstances discourage them. We remember them because they kept going through failure and ultimately triumphed. If we follow their example, we can be certain that we will share in their triumph too.

The first thing that we see them doing is to **TURN TO THE LORD**. Consider Ezra's response to the sin of the people in Ezra 9:5-6. When he learned of all of the ungodliness occurring among the returned exiles, he didn't try to solve the problem on his own or act like it wasn't there. Instead, he brought it straight to God.

Even 2500 years later, this problem-solving strategy is still every bit as important. When I say that we should turn to the Lord in times of failure and trouble, I'm not saying something novel that you've never heard before. There are probably a hundred different hymns in our hymnal that encourage us to cast our cares on Him. However, as is too often the case, what we know we should do and what we actually do can be very different things. The hymn might ask "Did you think to pray?", but all too often, we don't think to pray. We try to struggle through things on our own, which only makes the disaster worse. Instead of making that mistake, we need to look to the Lord before we do anything else.

Second, we must remember to **BLESS THE LORD**. In this light, let's read together from the courageous words of Job described in Job 1:20-22. This is a man who has lost everything in one stroke, other than his shrew of a wife, and yet, he never blames God for it. He does spend most of the rest of the book of Job demanding an explanation, but he never points the finger and says that it's God's fault. Instead, he blesses God simply because he is still alive.

As many of us have likely experienced, the reaction of many when they encounter tragedy and failure is quite different. They don't hesitate to charge the Almighty with wrongdoing. It's His fault they're broke! It's His fault that Mama died! And on and on and on. People like this are often pretty good at blaming others for smaller failures in their lives, but when it comes to the really big failures, they blame God.

What these people don't understand is that of all of the earthly things they can have and lose, they're actually entitled to none of them. As Job points out, when we die, every one of us is going to lose it all. God has not and indeed will never promise us an earthly joy without end. Every breath we take, every minute that we live, we live not because we somehow deserve to live, but because God has given us a gift. We may have problems, but the problem is never God.

Third, we must **ENTREAT THE LORD**. David exemplifies this in Psalm 5:1-2. There is no such thing as a failure that cannot be rectified, a problem that cannot be solved if the Lord is involved. This is particularly true with respect to the spiritual problems that we create for ourselves. There are plenty of people who somehow manage to muddle through life and its manifold disappointments without God, but nobody finds forgiveness outside of Him. Nor are we fooling Him when we refuse to confess our sin. He already knows what we've done. The only thing that the head-in-the-sand routine does is prolong the period for which we are separated from Him. That makes the devil happy, but it

doesn't do much good for anybody else. When we sin, especially when we sin big, we need to be straightforward about our sin, learn the hard lessons, and seek His help in applying those lessons too. God makes everything better.

Finally, we must **TRUST THE LORD**. Let's look at what Paul reveals in Romans 9:6-8. Sure, to Paul and to the other Jewish Christians who had become a despised minority among their people, it looked like the gospel was failing. Most of the Jews rejected Jesus and even responded with jealousy when the Gentiles embraced Him. Failure, right? Not really. Instead, the gospel was succeeding in doing what God had always intended, not in bringing in a group of people with the right ancestors, but in bringing together a group of people from every nation who loved Him. Israel did follow Christ, not the physical nation of Israel, but the spiritual Israel, which to God, was the only one that mattered.

Even today, friends, we may fall prey to the suspicion that the word of God has failed. Our nation seems to become more godless every day, we all have family members and friends who aren't receptive to the gospel, we face spiritual struggles both inside and outside the church, and it seems like the devil has got us all where he wants us.

Not so. To this day, God's word and power continue to accomplish His work. Today, just as 2000 years ago, He is still looking for people who want to be His prized possession, and He is still finding them. Conversely, if people don't have any use for God, He doesn't have any use for them. When people reject God, that doesn't put His triumph in any doubt. It only ensures that they won't participate in that triumph when it occurs. That's not His failure. That's not the gospel's failure. That's their failure. No matter how things may look, we can always find victory through God.