

Overcoming Failure

Dear Friend,

Perhaps like Peter you have failed miserably and now you are having a hard time overcoming it. When Jesus needed Peter the most, Peter had denied Jesus three times (John 18:15-18, 25-27). Now, like Peter, you have a choice. You can continue to live a defeated life tormented by your failures, or you can overcome those failures and allow them to deepen your commitment to Christ.

Peter had denied Jesus three times. In John 21:15-19 we see Jesus helping Peter overcome his failures and nailing down his commitment to his calling. Jesus asks Peter three times if Peter loves Him. When Peter responds positively, Jesus tells him to feed His sheep. These sheep are Jesus' followers who are fed by the teaching of the scriptures and helping those in need. Peter is able to do this when he faces his failures, and then accepts Christ's forgiveness and does what Jesus tells him to do.

Robert Simms points out that "every failure is an experience in response to which a person may gain wisdom, or become defeated. Each failure is an opportunity to accumulate the information that will either redirect life or steal its momentum. Every life contains failure: some contain multiple failures. A person's failures constitute either a proving ground for renewal or a landfill for a wasted life. The difference is made by the determination not to give in to the plot of the adversary, Satan, to weave a pattern of defeat and despair into life until everything appears so bleak that a person gives up trying to live for Christ."

In 1854 Ulysses S. Grant was stranded as a man who was basically homeless after leaving the army. Finally getting home to his family he was such a business failure in 1859 he was living with a family so he could be close to his job. He didn't even have enough money to travel home each night. He was such a failure in business Grant returned to the army. Grant faced his failures. He learned from them and became one of the greatest generals in U.S. history, as well as being a two term president

Many people, although experiencing one failure after another, still refuse to face their failures and let the Lord of Life redirect the way they are going. Such individuals remind me of the worms I saw fried in the middle of the sidewalk, I was walking on one hot summer day. Although they knew the path was deadly they still insisted on crossing it. Like those worms on the path of failure, many instead of using failure to draw closer to God insist on remaining on the path of failure. Perhaps they do this because they have convinced themselves that failure is final and there is no hope for anything else.

God tells us in Isaiah 43:18-19 that this is not the case. "Forget the former things; do not dwell on the past. See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it? I am making a way in the wilderness and streams in the wasteland."

Mark, the Gospel writer knew what it was to experience failure. He had walked away from Paul on the first missionary journey (Acts 13:13). As a result Paul did not consider Mark reliable and we read in Act 15:37, 38 when it came to a second journey, "Barnabas wanted to take John, also called Mark with them, but Paul did not think it wise to take him, because he had deserted them in Pamphylia and had not continued with them in the work. They had such a sharp disagreement that they parted company. Barnabas took Mark and sailed for Cyprus, but Paul chose Silas and left, commended by the brothers to the grace of the Lord."

Mark had failed. He had left from that first journey when things got tough and took off for Jerusalem. But in Mark's story, like so many throughout the Scriptures we see that failure is not final because Mark faced his failure and received Christ's forgiveness.

It wasn't final for Moses when he killed the Egyptian rather than depending on God to fight his battles. As a result of his failure Moses had to flee, but if you read the rest of the story, you will see it wasn't final. God used Moses failure to mold him in that desert to become a mighty man of God.

David failed miserably when he let lust take over and he committed adultery and murder. Yet we see that David paid a big price for his failure, but because of God's mercy and forgiveness, failure wasn't final. We see in Psalm 51 David facing his failures.

When Mark had failed on that first missionary journey by quitting half way through he had not only failed Paul but also Barnabas. Yet Barnabas did not give up on Mark and as a result it was much easier for Mark to realize that failure is not final but an opportunity to nail down a deeper commitment to Christ. Ten years later we see Paul writing Philemon from prison and saying, "Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, sends you greetings. And so do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas and Luke, my fellow worker." During Paul's second missionary journey he had wrote Timothy and asked him to "get Mark and bring him with you, because he is helpful to me in my ministry (2 Tim.4:11).

The story of Mark stands as a beacon of hope in the midst of the condemnation and depression that failure brings. It clearly shows that God is a God of the second chance, and how He can use even our failures, when we face them, and then surrender them to Jesus asking Him for forgiveness.

If Mark could fail Paul and face his failures and then be restored to a position of trust as a co-minister you and I can continue on in spite of previous failure. That is the message of the gospel, or good news, that Mark went on to write about in the Gospel of Mark that we have in our Bibles. Mark shows us that when failure has taken place, we can through the grace of God face our failures and then, receiving forgiveness, pick up from where we have failed and move on.

Maybe someone has failed you. Like Paul you consider that person unreliable and a failure. What would have happened to Mark if Barnabas had not come to his rescue? Mark might have been so consumed with guilt and depression that he may not have gone on to do a great work for the Lord.

Thank God that Jesus is a Barnabas in the lives of each of us when no one else seems to be there. The love of Jesus Christ not only gives us the second chance we need but it can use our failures and work through us to provide that second chance to others.

I have seen over and over again, not only in my life but also in the lives of hundreds of previously homeless men and women, that failure is not final. It is not final because there is hope for Christ is Risen. When a person asks God for forgiveness for their failures of the past we see this glorious forgiveness given along with a second chance through the grace provided through Jesus Christ.

A few years ago in the midst of experiencing a major failure in my life I came across a book by Dr. David Ireland entitled Why Drown When You Can Walk On Water? He stated, "Not only does God have a purpose and plan for our lives; He also has His own timetable. In Philippi Paul was delivered from prison almost immediately. In Ephesus he spent two years in prison. When a crowd tried to seize Jesus 'no one laid a hand on Him, because His time had not yet come' (John 7:30). And when He was given over to His greatest trial, it was because, as Jesus Himself said, "My appointed time is near" (Matt.26:18)."

As I meditated on this fact, I knew if I was going to effectively keep on going in spite of failure I had to first accept the fact that God is in control and has His own timetable. That meant being patient and believing Romans 8:28. I have to believe it when it says "in all things God works for the good of those who love Him."

Instead of letting failure depress me, I had to see it like the little grain of sand that gets into the nucleus of an oyster. The oyster protects itself from the irritating sand by releasing a crystalline substance that surrounds the sand. After a passage of time that grain of sand turns into a pearl. The crystalline substance I had to release around failure was the constant knowledge that God was in control of the situation and was going to use it to create pearls in my life called the fruits of the Spirit. Paul describes these in Gal 5:22, 23. "But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self control" (NIV).

The fact is if I let that grain of trouble start worrying me instead of causing me to worship God, the end result will be depression. That leads me to the second point in using failure to deepen our commitment to Christ. This is expressed in D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones' book Spiritual Depression. "The main act in the matter of spiritual living is to know how to handle yourself. You have to take yourself in hand, you have to address yourself, preach to yourself." The verse Lloyd-Jones is referring to is Psalm 42:11 which says, "Why are you downcast, O my soul? Why so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise Him my Savior and my God." In further reference to this verse Lloyd-Jones states, "Have you realized that most of your unhappiness in life is due to the fact that you are listening to yourself instead of talking to yourself? You must say to your soul: 'Why art thou cast down' – what business have you to be disquieted? You must turn on yourself, and say to yourself: 'Hope thou in God'—instead of muttering in this depressed, unhappy way. And then you must go on to remind yourself of God, Who God is, and what God has done, and what God has pledged Himself to do."

The third point in facing failure is to take a stand against those crazy tapes of hopelessness and negativism going around in your mind and ask yourself "why am I so upset when I can put my hope in God and praise Him?" I used to keep a small sign in my office that said, "God has not called you to be successful but faithful". This helped me to remember that even in times of failure I can still remain faithful to God.

The fourth step involves getting proper rest, food, water and prayer when we are physically, mentally or emotionally exhausted. Elijah is a classical example of this in 1 Kings 19. He had just experienced a tremendous victory over the prophets of Baal as fire fell from heaven and consumed his sacrifice to God. As a result, Queen Jezebel was out to get him. In 1 Kings 19:3 we read, "Elijah was afraid and ran for his life." As he ran he probably felt guilty for running and then felt like a failure. Then in verse 4 it says, "He came to a broom tree, sat down under it and prayed that he might die. 'I have had enough, Lord,' he said, 'Take my life.'" In 1 Kings 19:5-8 we see how God helped Elijah use his failure for greater service by having him lie down and get some sleep. After a period of sleep an angel then came and woke Elijah up and gave him food and water. After rest, food and water Elijah proceeded in his work knowing that failure can be a launching pad for greater service unto God.

The final point in facing failure includes the determination to know God and fulfill His purpose for your life. When Elijah went forth, after proper rest, food and water, we see him seeking God. In response God specifically gives Elijah direction for his life in verses 15-17 of 1 Kings 19.

Dr. Craig Ellison in his book, From Stress to Well-Being, specifically states how important a positive relationship with God, resulting in a sense of purpose is for facing failure. "Spiritual well-being is primarily the result of a positive relationship with God that grounds a person in the knowledge and experience of His love. As the result of a satisfying, personal relationship with God, a foundation of abiding acceptance, love, adequacy, respect, identity, security, and significance is established in one's being. As one's relationship with God deepens, a sense of vocation or calling also emerges. This normally leads to commitment to purposes that produce ultimate meaning in life. Commitment to God promotes a sense of purpose that both permeates and transcends the mundane and temporal."

Such a sense of purpose draws us out of ourselves and our failures as we are awakened to the needs of others. This awakening by the Holy Spirit to the needs of others causes the seeds of perfect love to be planted within us. As a result this "perfect love drives out fear" (1 John 5:18) and gives us the ability to face our failures and use these past failures to help those in need. This includes feeding the hungry, sheltering the homeless, preserving creation, and reaching out to others as the scriptures direct.

Matthew 5:14, 16 says "You are the light of the world... Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven." Jesus is our light and life. The real meaning of "Let your light shine" is to let Jesus live in you and work through you. When one's religion becomes totally self-servicing and the light of Christ's love does not shine, depression and feelings of failure are the result.

That is why we must continue to move forth by faith helping others in spite of past failures. In order to do this we must learn how to rejoice and remain optimistic in spite of the circumstances. Paul expressed such optimism while in prison when he wrote in Philippians 4:4-6, "Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God."

It's hard to rejoice when every day the news is filled with distressing stories about the world's economic problems, earthquakes, wars and famines. Yet true believers in Jesus Christ can be eternal optimists knowing that all of these events are a foreshadowing of the return of Christ. Jesus said, prior to His return, "you will hear of wars and rumors of wars, but see to it that you are not alarmed. Such things must happen, but the end is still to come. Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be famines and earthquakes in various places" (Matt.24:6, 7 NIV).

As the end of the world as we know it approaches, we can choose to be optimistic or depressed. Jesus says, "You will be handed over to be persecuted and put to death, and you will be hated by all nations because of me. At that time many will turn away from the faith and will betray and hate each other, and many false prophets will appear and deceive many people. Because of the increase of wickedness, the love of most will grow cold, but he who stands firm to the end will be saved"(Matt.24:9-13).

During this time of earthquakes, famines, wars, and persecution, many will become severely depressed and will fall away from the faith. They will feel that God has failed them. With one calamity after another, Jesus says, "the love of most will grow cold." As a result donor fatigue will set in and many will give up. Yet in the midst of this a promise is given that the one, "who stands firm to the end will be saved."

At those moments in life that my personal universe seems to be collapsing, as the radiating sun offering hope for the future fades, and darkness prevails, I must know that at just the right moment Jesus will intervene. His power and great glory will meet every need. As I reflect upon His faithful intervention in the past, along with His promises for the future, depression leaves and faith appears. For Christ has promised "Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away" (Mark 13:31).

We can remain steadfast and overcome depression knowing that failure is not final because Jesus Christ has promised He will never leave us nor forsake us. We are not alone. We can learn from these failures. As we grow older we do not have to get bitter but with God's love working in us we can become better. We realize our faithful service is not a waste of time and energy. God is faithful and as a result we can overcome all feelings of failure by believing and receiving the words and promises of scripture.

The time has come to stop living in the past. Because Christ is Risen failure isn't final. We can face our failures, confess our sins, and experience God's forgiveness. Remember that "by His grace" we have been given not only a second chance now, but "eternal encouragement and good hope." Now stop living like failure is final and let God's grace provided through our risen Lord Jesus Christ "encourage your heart and strengthen you in every good deed and word" (2 Thess. 2:17).

Yours in Christ,


Larry Rice