

# Failure

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John 21<sup>15-19</sup> / 1 Tim 1<sup>12-17</sup> / Psalm 51<sup>1-13</sup>

Baptism is a wonderful thing. It affirms so much about who we are because it affirms that God loves us and that we have begun to understand that love so much so that we want to express that publicly through an enacted confession of faith. In baptism Jesus says to us ‘I’ve shared my life with you as completely as possible; now, will you share your life with me? And through baptism we say ‘Yes’ to that question. But baptism is also an expression of something else. You see in baptism we say that we share in Christ’s death as well as His resurrection. So what’s with that? Why do we have to share in Christ’s death?

We have to do so because baptism also recognises something else that lies at the core of our existence and that thing is **failure**. In baptism we admit our failure to live successfully according to our own rules. In baptism we admit that our failure is so significant that we must start again – this time with God. So failure – our failure is a significant theme for Christians. It’s something we need to learn how to deal with and it’s something we need to learn to understand.

Paul failed. Peter failed. Even King David failed. There is hardly a character in the Bible who did not fail at some point. The Bible is full of people who failed starting, of course, with Adam and

Eve and finishing with the judgement of the angel who deliberately failed God.

What are we to make of failure? Do we just accept it and accept that we are failures? Do we ignore it and simply move on or, do we do what so many try to do and **deny** that we really do fail?

Perhaps this last choice is the most dangerous.

Henry Ford is one of the biggest names in American life. His use of mass production in manufacturing the Model T automobile shaped not only the economy and industry, but the values of 20th century. Ford loved the ordinary folk and they loved him back. By 1920, half of all cars on US roads were Fords. But it wasn't just cars that Ford was selling. He preached a new gospel to a public raised on Puritan ideals of delayed gratification and self-control. Ford believed that money was for spending, and that workers should use their income to buy products that would improve their lives—products like his Model T.

Seen as a hero for making it possible for the average family to own a car, Ford's opinion was sought out for every area of life, from world peace to marriage and child care. But the adulation of others ultimately convinced Ford that he was infallible and **couldn't fail** and this led him to ruinously bad decisions. It blinded him to his own hypocrisy as he preached family values and old-fashioned virtue and yet kept a mistress. It may also have driven him to destroy his only child. The older Ford—

offended by his son's gentle style and superior education—ruthlessly undercut him at every turn, only then to mourn grievously when Edsel died young.

Ford's last days were sorrowful. On a visit to the house where he had lived as a newlywed, he told his chauffeur, "I've got a lot of money, and I'd give every penny of it right now just to be here with Mrs. Ford."

The Gospel paints a picture of humanity in which the background is God's love and the foreground is largely a compilation of our failure. We call that failure sin but it is often far more helpful to call it what it is – a failure. So what are we to make of failure? Well the first thing we must admit is that not all failure is bad, indeed, it can be a productive part of life.

A baby learning to walk inevitable fails many many times over. A child learning to play the piano fails constantly. An athlete fails any time they don't win but they must push through these failures if they are ever to win the prize. Parents often feel like failures with their own children because they don't live up to their standards or they don't perform the way the parents wanted and this can become a real problem because the child feels this disappointment and takes on that sense of failure even though their behaviour may be simply one of choosing a different path to the one the parent wanted for them. It is often the case where real failure is involved that it is precisely this

failure which will enable the child to perform according to their abilities and not below them.

When asked by GQ magazine about the best advice he has to offer, actor Nick Nolte said, “This is going to sound strange, but my best advice is to accept losing. It's the grandest thing you can do. We as a culture think it's a terrible thing to lose, but it's only through losing that we grow. We don't grow by winning. ... But our culture glorifies winning, so to accept losing is the opposite of everything we're taught.”

It's interesting that Nolte should pick a failure to win as the failure not to worry about because in many ways this is the lesser evil compared to a failure of integrity. When we lie, we steal, we behave in ways we know are not right – these constitute a failure of integrity and they generally effect many others.

When we fail to win we may leave a few disappointed supporters around the place but the person who generally feels this sort of failure the most is ourselves.

Our response to failure is interesting.

In Psalm 51 we find David confessing his failure to God but initially he did everything he could to hide it. He had committed adultery with Bathsheba who became pregnant and so to hide what he had done he tried to get her husband to sleep with her and when that didn't work he had him killed. No one was any

the wiser but God knew and he sent Nathan the prophet to confront David with his sin.

We hide from our failure in many ways. We may simply destroy the evidence as David did. We may lie as Annanias and Sapphira did in Acts when they tried to deceive the church about how much they had given or we may end up convincing ourselves that what was a failure on our part wasn't that bad. Finally, we may run as Jonah did when he was asked to warn the Ninevites. This is perhaps the most common response, to separate ourselves from others – to stand apart from those who might be able to hold us accountable. Whatever the case may be the better choice is always to face our failures and to learn from them and to do this we need one thing more than anything else. What might that be? (Ask: various answers provided: courage, honesty, humility..)

We need a loving community. Anthony D'Angelo is the founder of Collegiate EmPowerment. Back in 1995 at the young age of twenty-three, Tony set out on his vision to transform American Higher Education and this quote comes from him. How true. 'Without a sense of caring there can be no sense of community.' This I think is the key lesson in Peter's experience. We need a community who will both hold us accountable and yet walk the difficult journey of redemption with us. We need people who can both understand our weakness **and** help us to admit it and

move on. This is something of what it means to develop a sense of caring.

In Peter's case I think we find all three reactions to failure. He certainly lied when asked if he knew Jesus. We get no sense that the others knew about his betrayal so we can say that he hid it from them – at least prior to the reading we heard today and in one sense, at least, Peter ran: he ran back to what he knew – to fishing and to looking after the basics of life.

What's fascinating to me is the reaction of Jesus to this failure. Remembering that this failure represented a considerable betrayal of both friendship and of faith. Peter had betrayed a man who had been his greatest friend and mentor over a three year period and not only this he'd betrayed everything he had claimed to believe in to do this – to separate himself from Jesus. So Peter tried to put it behind him. He lied, he said nothing to the other disciples that we know of and he ran, he ran from any association with Jesus and from any calling he had to be a leader because remember, before his betrayal Jesus had made him the leader of the Church in front of the disciples by saying of him that 'on this rock I will build my church.' So what does Jesus do in response to this?

You and I would perhaps have looked to 'out' Peter. To name him and shame him. To speak openly about his hypocrisy and his betrayal but Jesus does none of that.

Jesus didn't look first to punish or even to recall the event and so shame him. I suspect that for Peter the memory of what he'd done was enough. Rather what Jesus did was that for each **'movement'** Peter made to **run** from Him – Jesus made a deliberate call **back into service and into belonging**.

Peter, feed my lambs. Peter, tend my sheep. Peter, feed my sheep. Peter had lied about knowing Jesus but Jesus says – 'Feed my lambs.' In other words Jesus said to Him – 'I trust you with the very youngest of my flock; the most tender, the most vulnerable. I want you to look after them.'

Peter had hidden this betrayal from the others but Jesus says 'Tend my sheep.' In other words he was saying to Peter 'Come back to the task for which you were called and made. Don't run away from your true calling because you've made a mistake. Come back to me and I will see that your life is filled with meaning again. Don't let your life be defined by a failure but move forward into purpose and wholeness again.'

Peter had given up any thought of leading the disciples but Jesus says 'Feed my sheep.' In other words Jesus was saying to him – 'I trusted you with a greater calling than to simply catch fish – don't go back to the lesser calling just because you've tripped up. Go back to my calling – take up the banner again; I trust you. Now, **trust yourself!**

God uses our failures to teach us to look to Him for true strength. If we are to do that, however, we must not allow our lives to be defined by our failures. God does not want that. God has a greater calling for you and I and He longs that we might give ourselves to that calling. I wonder if you've given away something dear to your heart because you failed once or twice. I wonder if you see your life largely as a failure? I wonder if one disastrous failure has tended to colour how you see yourself? If this is you can I encourage you to open your heart to God again and to hear that call to a greater purpose – to a greater goal and to a greater understanding of yourself.

AMEN.