

TODAY IN THE WORD™

A ministry of Moody Bible Institute

How God Works Through
FAILURE



JUNE 2020

Second Chances

From the President of Moody Bible Institute

“Through grace, we are given something we do not deserve, and we have not earned. Grace drives condemnation away.”



On our honeymoon, Dee and I traveled up the coast of Spain into Italy and Switzerland. Dee was navigating with a paper map

while I drove. We had just entered a bewildering roundabout, when she said, “Go that way!” I quickly turned . . . and heard a thud. Much to my dismay, I realized I had hit a man on a motorcycle. And, not just any man. A police officer! “Oh no,” I thought. “I’m going to prison on my honeymoon!” When the officer approached, I said, “I’m sorry. I didn’t see you.” He asked the purpose of our visit. A few very long minutes later, he returned, saying, “I’m going to let you go.” I was stunned. No ticket. No handcuffs! I had been given a second chance!

Have you ever felt the power of a second chance? In John 8, we read that Jesus was at the temple courts, early in the morning (v. 2). As He was teaching, with a crowd gathered around, the teachers of the Law and Pharisees pulled a woman before Him. She had committed adultery, her sin punishable by stoning (v. 6). I can imagine her accusers, with rocks

in their hands, shoving her in front of Jesus. The Pharisees’ question was intended to trap Jesus (v. 6). Rather than answer, He stooped to draw or write in the sand. Many scholars believe He was writing the names of the woman’s accusers and their respective sins. He said, “Let any of you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her” (v. 7). We can almost hear those stones drop. As the list grew, her accusers left.

Jesus’ interaction with the accused woman is a beautiful depiction of grace, the unmerited, undeserved favor of God. Through grace, we are given something we do not deserve, and have not earned. Grace drives condemnation away. Jesus told her accusers, if anybody is without sin, let *him* throw the first stone. The only person without sin was Jesus! He asked, “Has no one condemned you?” And then, “Go now and leave your life of sin” (vv. 10–11). Jesus didn’t minimize or excuse the woman’s failure. We are all sinners and stand in need of the grace of God (Rom. 3:20–24). But Jesus said to her, and He says to us, “Go now and leave your life of sin” (v. 11). Repent, believe, and follow Jesus. That is our second chance. ■

The Grace of Failure

by Dr. John Koessler

“Instead of dwelling on our failure, we ought to treat it as a signpost. Failure shows us where we are lacking and motivates us to look to God.”

You have probably seen a bumper sticker that reads, “My child made the honor roll.” You may also have seen the one that says, “My child beat up your honor student.” But you have probably never seen a bumper sticker that boasts, “My child has failed at everything.” Nobody likes to fall short of the mark.

Yet when it comes to the Old Testament law, failure seems to have been God’s plan all along. The law was designed to help us understand the nature of righteousness, but it was never meant to *make* us righteous. The primary function of the law was to convict and condemn. Romans 3:20 explains, “Therefore no one will be declared righteous in God’s sight by the works of the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of our sin.” The way God makes us righteous is “apart from the law” (v. 21). The righteousness of God comes to us through faith in Jesus Christ (v. 22).

God uses our inability to live up to the righteous standard of the law as an instrument of grace. Through it, we are made aware of the need

for our righteousness to come from another source. We cannot earn it for ourselves, so Christ must earn it for us. The only way we can obtain a righteous standing in God’s sight is by receiving it as a gift. Elsewhere Paul compares the law to a guardian or tutor which had “locked up everything under the control of sin, so that what was promised, being given through faith in Jesus Christ, might be given to those who believe” (Gal. 3:22).

Even the worst failure can be an agent of grace that drives us into the arms of Christ. It shows us our need and teaches us to rely upon Christ’s forgiveness and help. We must avoid two extremes when it comes to failure. One is to make too much of it. The other is to make too little. Instead of dwelling on our failure, we ought to treat it as a signpost. Failure shows us where we are lacking and motivates us to look to God. Only He can make up the difference. Dr. Erwin Lutzer observes, “Those who have failed miserably are often the first to see God’s formula for success.” The name for that formula is grace. ■

For Further Study

To learn more, read *Failure: The Back Door to Success* by Erwin Lutzer (Moody Publishers).

We hope these questions will help you consider (or discuss with others) what God is teaching you through this month's study of His Word. We've left a bit of room to write down your thoughts as well!

WEEK 1: What is the difference between sinful and non-sinful failure?

WEEK 2: How is God's perspective on failure different from our own?

WEEK 3: In what ways is a "sin of omission" a sin in God's eyes (see June 19)?

WEEK 4: Have you ever experienced something you viewed as failure that ended up being used by God for a positive outcome?

TODAY IN THE WORD™

How God Works Through Failure

*Because of the LORD's great love we are not consumed,
for his compassions never fail.—Lamentations 3:22*

This month in *Today in the Word* we'll look at our disappointments, regrets, and setbacks in a new way—in the light of Christ's unfailing love and sovereignty. Moses, Jacob, Isaac, the Old Testament prophets, the apostle Peter—none was exempt from failure. Even David, “a man after [God's] own heart,” failed miserably when he committed adultery with Bathsheba and then sent her husband to war to be killed.

When we see all the people in the Bible who suffered a shameful fiasco at one point or another, it may look like we have no hope . . . until we remember the Cross. We'll be reminded that our sins are covered with the blood of Christ, and God is merciful *before* and *after* we sin. We'll see failure as a life lesson from the Lord and as a way to revival in Christ. We pray this Bible study will encourage you and help you:

- Learn from biblical characters who failed
- Understand better God's perspective on failure
- Distinguish between sinful and non-sinful failure
- Rejoice and trust in our unfailing God

Thank you for studying with us! May the Lord redeem the failures of your life, and may His love keep you and guide you. May you walk close to Him in all seasons. ■

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We All Fail

Read Ecclesiastes 9:1–10

The same destiny overtakes all.—Ecclesiastes 9:3

Have you ever felt that no matter how hard you try you are destined to fail? According to tradition, King Solomon wore a ring engraved with the words “This too shall pass.” When things were going badly, Solomon would look at it and remember not to get too anxious. And when things were going well, he would be reminded not to get too confident. The ring was a symbol of the fleeting and temporary nature of life.

In our fallen and sinful world, we can easily conclude that everything is doomed to failure. Solomon correctly observed that none of our earthly success will endure beyond the grave. Death is humanity’s “common destiny” (v. 2). Life will eventually end. Even our greatest accomplishments will one day be forgotten (vv. 5–6). If we view this present life as our primary goal, we will agree with William Shakespeare who said: “Life is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.” Earthly wisdom can only advise us to enjoy

life’s gifts and pleasures—such as food, marriage, and work—while we can (vv. 7–10).

We must never forget that only God gives life true meaning, and thankfully, we are in His hands (v. 1). This month, we’ll study what the Bible has to say about failure. We want to understand how God works through our personal failure and what the Bible teaches about failure and success. Then we will explore more fully God’s perspective, which is often the opposite of our own! We’ll look at sinful failure as a way to experience God’s gifts of forgiveness and hope. And finally, we’ll contrast our human weakness with God’s unfailing nature.

► Studying failure may seem like a depressing topic. But we hope this month’s study will be a huge encouragement to you. When we better understand our human tendency to fail, we avoid pride and embrace humility. It will caution us to look at life’s meaning and success through God’s eyes.

Pray with Us

As we begin this month’s devotional study, our prayer is that God will encourage you. Ask Him to reveal to you the way He sees failure and how He can and will use it for His glory.

Doomed to Fail

Read Acts 5:17–42

If it is from God, you will not be able to stop these men. —Acts 5:39

Have you ever heard of Gamaliel? A respected Pharisaic leader, he was the apostle Paul's teacher prior to conversion (Acts 22:3). In today's reading, this wise rabbi advised the Jewish leaders not to put themselves in the position of fighting God. These men were strongly opposed to the new Christian faith, which had been flourishing (Acts 22:12–16). To counteract what they saw as a dangerous uprising, they arrested the apostles and threw them in prison. Of course, God's purpose would not be thwarted, and He miraculously released them (Acts 5:17–26).

Then the situation grew even more intense. The religious leaders brought the apostles in for questioning before the high priest and were given a powerful evangelistic sermon (vv. 29–32). Instead of responding positively, they were furious and wanted to kill the apostles (v. 33)! Gamaliel stepped in as the voice of reason (vv. 34–39). Notice that he urges them to consider "carefully" (v. 35). He argued through logic and

historical examples that they should not overreact.

After all, if this new movement was merely human, it would fail. But, Gamaliel cautioned, if it originated from God it would succeed and they would find themselves on the wrong side of history. Opposing God is never a good idea! It is interesting to note that Luke recorded this speech, given by an unbeliever, as a standard by which to judge the early church's growth. Clearly, the success of the gospel wasn't a human thing but a work of God! Persuaded by Gamaliel's words, the Jewish leaders ordered the apostles flogged instead. The apostles rejoiced to suffer for the name of Christ and continued preaching the good news of salvation (vv. 40–42).

► Peter and the other apostles show us how to respond to suffering and persecution—with faith and joy. We, too, should say: "We must obey God rather than human beings" (v. 29). What situation in your life today calls for this kind of biblical courage?

Pray with Us

As you read today's passage from Acts 5, pray that the Lord will speak to you through the courage of the apostles and the wisdom of Gamaliel. May we grow in courage and obedience to His Word!

Failure and Faithfulness

Read Matthew 25:14–30

Well done, good and faithful servant!—Matthew 25:23

In your own life, do you take risks or play it safe? When it comes to living for God, do we take bold steps or do we protect ourselves by staying in a risk-free zone. In today's passage, Jesus told a parable about a master who gave his servants money to invest. In the story, a man went on a journey and entrusted his financial resources to three servants. When he returned, he heard and evaluated their reports. Two servants had invested their bags of gold and earned more (vv. 19–23). The master praised them both, "Well done, good and faithful servant!" The third, however, explained that out of fear he'd hidden the gold and done nothing (vv. 24–30). He was rebuked and thrown out of the house.

This parable teaches important truths about failure and *success* from God's perspective. If failure is anything we try to do without God, then what is a biblical definition of success? The answer in this parable is that both failure and success center on our faithfulness or obedience to God, which also means that failure

consists largely in unfaithfulness or disobedience. The servant who failed made excuses and rationalized his inaction, instead of confessing his wickedness, laziness, and foolishness (vv. 26–27).

The principle in this parable is that we have all been entrusted with various resources, which we should actively invest for the benefit and glory of our heavenly Father. Our resources may differ according to God's sovereign choice and each person's ability (v. 15), but in any case faith doesn't play it safe. If we're stewards of what we've been given, we'll actively pursue the will of God, and receive the incredible reward of sharing in our master's "happiness" or "joy" (ESV).

► "Am I doing this out of fear or faith?" is a good decision-making question. The third servant was paralyzed by fear, while the first two stepped out in faith. If you're feeling uncertain today, ask God for the wisdom to discern your own motives.

Pray with Us

Faithfulness is an important theme in today's Scripture passage. Let's pray the Lord would show us how to use faithfully and wisely everything He gives us, so that at the end we'll hear from Him: "Well done, good and faithful servant!"

Growing to Maturity

Read James 1:2–8

Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.—James 1:4

When we had a larger yard, my wife, Julia, and our kids enjoyed gardening. They planted a variety of seeds, looking forward to harvesting tomatoes, zucchini, carrots, and other vegetables. Day after day, they would water, pull weeds, and put up fences to keep out the local rabbits. Although the rabbits took more than their share, we enjoyed fresh vegetables throughout the summer.

In gardening as in life, a good harvest requires perseverance. How does this add to our understanding of failure and success? When we face troubles and trials in life, the godly response is perseverance. Our goal is to endure steadfastly with faith, patience, and joy (vv. 2–3). When we persevere, we grow toward maturity and godly success. But if we don't persevere, we're not growing, which is considered failure.

The author of Hebrews, for example, scolded his readers for this very reason (Heb. 5:12–14). They should have been eating solid food (advanced truths) by then, but instead

they were still only able to drink milk (basic truths). In the long run, the result of perseverance is maturity or wholeness (James 1:4). Other versions use the word “perfect,” and that is what we will be when God's work of salvation is completed in us.

We can cooperate with this process or we can hinder or even oppose it. How? By responding with anything other than perseverance, such as complaining or compromising. If we don't know how to persevere, God will give us this wisdom, and there's no shame in asking (v. 5). When we do, we should ask with expectant faith, not doubting the character of God (vv. 6–8). This kind of doubt or instability is part of the immaturity we're working to leave behind (see Eph. 4:14–15).

► Today's passage can have a significant impact on the way we pray. We often ask God to help us escape from troubles, but this might mean we're asking to escape from opportunities for spiritual growth. How might we pray differently?

Pray with Us

Is God calling you to a deeper, more committed life of prayer? During your time with God ask Him that the truth of Scripture will foster in you a devoted prayer life and a desire for the “solid food” of His Word.

God's Greater Good

Read 2 Samuel 7

Your house and your kingdom will endure forever before me.—2 Samuel 7:16

What are you asking of God today? C. S. Lewis once observed: “Prayer is request. The essence of request, as distinct from compulsion, is that it may or may not be granted. And if an infinitely wise Being listens to the requests of finite and foolish creatures, of course He will sometimes grant and sometimes refuse them.” Lewis reminds us that God knows what is best for us. If our prayers are answered “no,” we act like it’s a disaster. But the Lord really does know best, and in His perfect love and wisdom all His answers to prayer are perfect as well. Very often, as in today’s reading, He actually has something better in store for us!

David’s prayer, implicitly conveyed through the prophet Nathan, was to build a temple for the Lord (v. 2). This prayer showed that his heart was in the right place. Nonetheless, God said “no” (vv. 5–7). He had a bigger purpose and a better plan, as David later acknowledged (vv. 21–22).

The Lord promised present and future faithfulness to David and his descendants. Specifically, He promised that a future son of David would be king and build a temple for Him (v. 13). In fact, He told David: “Your house and your kingdom will endure forever before me; your throne will be established forever” (v. 16). It’s as if God said: “You want to build me a house?! I will build you a *real* house!” This promise is fulfilled in Christ. Another key part of biblical success is trusting God’s love, wisdom, and power above our own. He always wants our best and knows what’s best. Failure is trusting ourselves above the Lord. That sounds ludicrous but how often we do it anyway!

► Part of God’s promise to David was that He would discipline his future son as needed (v. 14). Today, God still disciplines those whom He loves (Heb. 12:5–11; Rev. 3:19). This might feel to us like failure, but it’s not!

Pray with Us

Lord Jesus, may we follow King David’s example to trust God’s love, wisdom, and power above our own. May we learn to view God’s discipline as a manifestation of His love.

Not in Vain

Read 1 Corinthians 15:50–58

Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain.—1 Corinthians 15:58

On the wall in our family room hangs an embroidered version of 1 Corinthians 15:58: “Your labor for the Lord is not in vain.” It was a gift from a dear friend during the years we served as Christian teachers in Vietnam, so it means a lot to us! Today’s verse is a reminder that we don’t know the results of our efforts for the Lord, but in faith we can trust that obedience is never in vain. In other words, there is no real failure, properly understood, when the Lord is on our side. Our labor for Him will never come up empty.

The single most powerful evidence in support of this claim is Christ’s Resurrection, and by extension, the certain hope of our own resurrection. We who were perishable and mortal—and thus unfit to inherit the kingdom of God (v. 50)—will become imperishable and immortal! How? It will happen instantaneously, “in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye” (v. 52). When? “At the last trumpet,” that is, when

Christ returns. Our “common destiny” (see June 1) and the just penalty for our sin—death—has been conquered by our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. His victory shout is a triumphant taunt: “Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?” (v. 55).

How should we respond?

First, Christ’s success means we’re to “stand firm. Let nothing move you” (v. 58). Second, we’re to be fully committed to the Lord’s work. There’s no such thing as halfhearted discipleship (Luke 14:25–33; Rev. 3:15–16). Biblically, then, to fail means not to stand firm or not to be fully committed to the Lord’s work—that is, not to walk by faith.

► Keeping God’s promises front and center in our lives can help us keep a biblical view of success and failure. Consider memorizing one of this month’s key verses. Or, choose a special verse to prominently display in your home or office to keep your focus on God.

Pray with Us

Today, we thank God for His promises, especially for the promise of our “common destiny” in His kingdom. May He help us “stand firm” and be fully committed to His work.

A Failed Building Project

Read Genesis 11:1–9

*Pride goes before destruction,
a haughty spirit before a fall.— Proverbs 16:18*

Search the internet for “paintings of the Tower of Babel” and take a close look at the results, especially the people in the paintings. They tend to be small, because the Tower dominates. But often there is one larger figure portrayed as a king or the leader of the construction project. That’s Nimrod, whom Scripture calls a “mighty hunter” (Gen. 10:8–10). He apparently ruled over Babel or Babylon at this time. Not surprisingly, his name means “we will rebel.” Genesis 11 doesn’t directly mention Nimrod, but the people building the Tower of Babel definitely lived up, or down, to the meaning of his name!

In this part of our study, we’ll explore the surprising differences between our perspective on failure (and success) and God’s perspective. The Tower of Babel, for instance, was certainly a success by human standards. People collaborated on this impressive construction project. The bricks they used were the best, most up-to-date technology (v. 3). Their ambitious dream was to make a name

for themselves (v. 4). This sounds like “best practice” from current leadership books!

By God’s standards, the enterprise was a sinful failure. The people’s determination not to be scattered (v. 4) disobeyed God’s command to multiply and fill the earth (Gen. 9:1). Their motives were prideful and their actions attempted to usurp God’s place. God didn’t wait for this evil to ripen: He intervened at a practical level to put a stop to it (11:5–7). He confused the people’s languages, and since they could no longer communicate with one another, the project died (vv. 8–9). *Babel*, which originally meant “gateway to a god,” instead came to signify “confused” and has even led to our English word “babble.”

► Babel or Babylon is a powerful picture of failure throughout Scripture. If you have time, we encourage you today to “skip ahead” and read Revelation, chapters 17–18. There you’ll see the fate God has in store for all pride and rebellion.

Pray with Us

Join us as we prayerfully consider the lessons in today’s story of the Tower of Babel. What a huge failure! And what an encouragement that in the end, God is always in control and His will always prevails!

A Difficult Lesson

Read Genesis 29:14–30

*In all your ways submit to him,
and he will make your path straight.—Proverbs 3:6*

Veggie Tales, featuring Bob and Larry as animated, singing vegetables, was a successful children’s Christian series and a dream come true for co-creator Phil Vischer. But after the business faced bankruptcy, Vischer realized he had treated success as an idol. He observed, “The impact that God has planned for us does not occur when we are pursuing impact. It occurs when we are pursuing God.” Through those difficult times, Vischer was reminded that God was sovereign: “Let go of outcomes and put your plans in God’s hands and let Him direct your steps.”

In today’s reading, Jacob learned an important life lesson, too. Jacob had been deceptive in the past. He stole Esau’s birthright and his father Isaac’s blessing. But in meeting his relative Laban he found a man who was even better at scheming than he was. Laban took advantage of the circumstances, including Jacob’s dependent situation and the young man’s romantic feelings for his daughter Rachel. In one deceptive

move, he married off his eldest daughter, Leah, and obtained fourteen years of free labor in the bargain.

There’s a certain dramatic irony in Jacob’s question, “Why have you deceived me?” (v. 25). When Laban responded with a cultural excuse and an obviously premeditated proposal, Jacob must have realized he’d been set up. But in the larger narrative, we see God’s just and loving discipline shaping Jacob’s spiritual character. Jacob stopped relying on himself and his own abilities and trusted in the Lord instead. God was not surprised or deceived by any of these events. And, of course, it’s worth remembering that the Messiah came through the line of David, of the tribe of Judah, and the son of Leah (Gen. 29:35).

► Have you experienced failure? Consider the life lessons you learned from those events. Have you ever shared this story with others in order to bring God glory? We encourage you to do so, in conversation or perhaps even in writing.

Pray with Us

We invite you to reflect on the truths we’ve learned so far. May we look to the Lord during our times of failure and discouragement, thank Him, and see opportunities for growth in His discipline.

Failure and God's Timing

Read Exodus 2:11–25

*Teach us to number our days,
that we may gain a heart of wisdom. —Psalm 90:12*

The book of Hebrews identifies Moses as a hero of the faith, even though he experienced failure. After reaching a position of power and wealth in Egypt, Moses decided to give it up. He chose instead “to be mistreated along with the people of God,” and “regarded disgrace for the sake of Christ as of greater value than the treasures of Egypt” (Heb. 11:24–28). Then, in Exodus 2:11, we see Moses react impulsively to the suffering of his people by striking and killing an Egyptian.

Moses failed to achieve what he had hoped: “Moses thought that his own people would realize that God was using him to rescue them, but they did not” (Acts 7:25). Rather than gaining support for the liberation of his people, he was forced to flee for his life. The right time in God's plan had not yet come, and Moses was not spiritually ready. We can imagine that he must have felt frustrated. Although he was an Israelite (v. 11), he had lived a life of palace privilege, while his

people had toiled in slavery. He no doubt felt the urge to do *something!* But it is clear that this murder of an Egyptian did not have the result he desired. Instead, it roused Pharaoh's anger and, humanly speaking, Moses lost everything.

At age 40, Moses ended up as a desert shepherd in the land of Midian. His “career” had crashed and burned. It is clear that God cared about the Israelites' suffering (vv. 23–25). So why didn't He bless Moses' well-intentioned act? Because His ways and timing are entirely different from ours. Forty more years would pass before He even introduced Himself to Moses in the burning bush (Ex. 3:2).

► Most of us appreciate plans and goals. We tend to assume God will bless any plan we think is worthwhile. What we should do instead is to submit all our plans, goals, motives, and timing to the Lord (James 4:13–15).

Pray with Us

Our devotional today shows us a few milestones in Moses' journey of obedience. Ask God to show you how He worked in your life journey, and thank Him for His guidance in your life.

The Prophet Who Disobeyed

Read Jonah 4

*In my distress I called to the LORD,
and he answered me.—Jonah 2:2*

As a professor at Moody Bible Institute, I regularly assign grades to my students. And I must admit that if Jonah was on my class roster, I'd be inclined to give him an F. After all, he failed to obey God's direct command. Instead of doing what was asked, Jonah ran the other way (1:1–2). Even after his miraculous rescue, Jonah obeyed but preached the harshest sermon he could (3:1–4). Even when Nineveh repented, Jonah still had a negative attitude. He hoped to witness the city's destruction and felt irritated and depressed at God's mercy (4:1–3). The book ends with a question from the Lord that condemns Jonah's ugly attitude (v. 11).

Why did Jonah disobey God? Nineveh was the capital city of Assyria, Israel's enemy. He wanted to see them obliterated! Yet God's assignment represented an open door for His mercy. Jonah tried to slam that door shut, but he should have known better. God's plans can never be thwarted. As I reflect on Jonah's story,

there's one factor which causes me to reconsider my grade—the book itself. Tradition holds that it was authored by Jonah, which would demonstrate that his heart had been changed by these events. The narrative is filled with personal details that most likely come from the prophet himself, including his undersea prayer (chapter 2) and the episode with the plant (4:5–9). He recounts his story with honesty and vulnerability.

Jonah was not trying to make himself look good! If he could tell his story, magnifying the Lord's love and compassion, then he was a man who'd been transformed by God. God is portrayed as the true Hero, and He turned all of Jonah's failures into successes within His divine plan.

► Transparency and vulnerability with fellow believers can bring glory to God. It might be painful to share our failures honestly, but when it shows God working to conform us to the image of His Son (Rom. 8:29), then it's worth it!

Pray with Us

Jonah, the prophet who disobeyed, makes us marvel at God's ability to work despite our mistakes. Ask the Lord to show you what you can learn from the failures and triumphs of Jonah's life.

Failure and Revival

Read 2 Chronicles 34

*He did what was right in the eyes
of the LORD.—2 Chronicles 34:2*

“Revive us again,” prays the classic hymn. “Fill each heart with Thy love; May each soul be rekindled with fire from above. Hallelujah! Thine the glory. Hallelujah! Amen.” King Josiah of Judah led one of the great spiritual revivals in Israelite history. From our human perspective, we might ask what was the point? Things were so bad that the priests had actually lost the Book of the Law (the Pentateuch), and no one even knew the commands they were failing to keep (see Deuteronomy 28). Judah was on its slide to conquest by Babylon, as richly deserved and foretold by several prophets. Nothing was going to change that, so why try?

The lesson from God is this: It’s never too late to do the right thing. Though the nation’s downward trajectory couldn’t be altered, worship and obedience mattered greatly to the Lord. Josiah’s reforms were significant. He purged the nation of idols, high places, Asherah poles, and altars to false gods (vv. 3–7). He began

repairs of Solomon’s Temple with gifts collected from the people (vv. 8–9). God allowed the Book of the Law to be found, which led to heartfelt repentance and sorrow over sin (v. 19). This also raised the question of whether Judah would suffer God’s wrath, as Scripture indicated (v. 21).

The prophetess Huldah confirmed that God would carry out the judgments written in the Book (vv. 23–25), but thanks to Josiah’s revival it wouldn’t happen in his lifetime (vv. 26–28). This delay gave more time for more widespread repentance. The king seized this opportunity and led Judah in a renewal of the covenant and a public commitment to obey the Law (vv. 29–33).

► Notice that Josiah became king at age 8 and sought the Lord at age 16. He began battling idolatry at age 20 and started the temple repair project at age 26. No matter your age, you can follow God wholeheartedly and have tremendous impact!

Pray with Us

With so many challenges distracting us from God’s truth in today’s world, let’s pray we’ll follow the Lord wholeheartedly, delight in His Word, and impact those around us.

No One Listened

Read Jeremiah 43

*We are unworthy servants;
we have only done our duty. — Luke 17:10*

Anskar, called the “Apostle to the North,” was one of the first missionaries to Scandinavia. In 826 A.D. the king summoned Anskar to preach the gospel in Denmark. Three years later, Anskar and the king were expelled. Failing to find success, Anskar went to Sweden, but “converts” there were motivated by politics, not faith. After a lifetime in ministry, Anskar died and the region reverted to paganism. Was Anskar a failure? His missionary work ended with nothing to show for it.

Jeremiah could identify with that feeling. In today’s reading, he delivered a message from the Lord: The people should not run to Egypt to escape the Babylonians. They’d promised in advance to obey (42:5–6). They’d been told God would bless them if they stayed in the land (42:9–12). They’d been warned that going to Egypt would lead to violence, famine, plague, and death (42:13–18). This decision should have been a no-brainer. Nonetheless, the people fled to Egypt anyway (42:19–22;

43:4–7). They accused Jeremiah of lying (v. 2), a serious charge given that false prophecy carried the death penalty. They accused him of being manipulated by his scribe and friend, Baruch (v. 3). As final indicators of their insolence, they kidnapped Jeremiah and Baruch and brought them along to Egypt (v. 6). What was God’s comfort in this situation? Another message to deliver (vv. 8–13)!

Jeremiah had few positive results to show from his prophetic ministry. Was he a failure? Not in God’s eyes! Jeremiah’s faithfulness meant his ministry was a success by God’s standards. We should remember that only the Lord can guarantee outcomes, and that the outcomes He measures and cares about are often not the same as ours.

► God expected Jeremiah to continue obeying, no matter what. He cares for our needs, but never above His own purposes and glory. Jesus taught this same idea of “duty” (Luke 17:7–10). How might this truth change your daily walk with Him?

Pray with Us

By today’s yardstick, Jeremiah had little to show for the success of his ministry. But Jeremiah’s faithfulness made him a success in God’s eyes. Thank God that we can trust His plans, and not our abilities.

The Successful Trap

Read Daniel 6

Whoever leads the upright along an evil path will fall into their own trap. —Proverbs 28:10

Daniel would not have made a very good action hero. He did nothing to avoid the plots of his enemies. Instead, he walked straight into their trap. He didn't use his friendship with the king to help himself. He put up no resistance and defeated no one. Why not? Was he clueless? Not at all. In faith, he knew the Lord would fight his battles for him. Sometimes success means waiting on the Lord (Ps. 37:7). Though by human standards Daniel failed, by God's criteria he succeeded because he kept his priorities in the right order and remained faithful in prayer.

The case for Daniel's enemies is just the opposite. By human standards, they succeeded. They were jealous of Daniel's power and suspicious of his integrity (vv. 4–5). They were obviously prejudiced against his Jewish identity (v. 13). Therefore, they carefully crafted a shrewd plan with clear objectives—one that circumvented, by pandering to his pride, the fact that the king favored Daniel—and

executed it perfectly. Success? Not in God's eyes, for they had attacked His righteous, beloved servant.

Daniel stepped into their trap by praying at his regular time and in his regular way (v. 10). Though the king was forced to throw Daniel to the lions, he rejoiced when God saved Daniel's life, and he quickly accomplished poetic justice by throwing Daniel's enemies themselves to the lions (v. 24). Just as in today's verse, they fell into their own trap!

One of the results of Daniel's "failure" was that he continued to prosper (v. 28). The main result was that the glory of the one true God was proclaimed throughout a pagan empire (vv. 25–27)!

► At the time of this story, Daniel was 82 years old. Those of us who are in the second half of life can take this as a reminder and encouragement to follow God wholeheartedly. You're never too young or too old to serve the Lord and bring Him glory!

Pray with Us

Daniel teaches us a great deal about failure and success. As you pray, ask the Lord to show you how lessons of Daniel's story apply to you personally.

The Freedom of Imprisonment

Read Philippians 1:12–18

What has happened to me has actually served to advance the gospel.—Philippians 1:12

“You may find yourself fighting against God if you fail to realize as Paul did here that the whole of your past has had the hand of God in it . . . even with failure in the past,” said author Paul Little, speaking about the apostle Paul. “You didn’t take God by surprise when that happened. God loves you and me, and He has a purpose for good in all of the providential, sovereign working of His will in all of the details of our lives.”

From a human perspective, Paul’s imprisonment indicated failure. Here we find him in chains, at the mercy of a powerful pagan empire. He could no longer pursue his missionary and church planting work (Rom. 15:20). But from God’s perspective, Paul continued to achieve success. Why? Opposition from the world was expected and signaled that he was on the right track. In prison, he was evangelizing his prison guards, his “captive audience”! This is why he could write: “What has happened to me has actually served to advance the gospel” (v. 12).

Notice that Paul’s top prayer request was not his freedom. It was the same as always—opportunities to proclaim the gospel. The palace guard that was responsible for him probably consisted of several thousand soldiers (v. 13). They became his mission field! In addition, because of Paul’s example, other Christians grew bold about preaching the gospel (v. 14). How far did this gospel-first priority stretch? Quite far. Paul wrote that even people with sinful motives were acceptable to him, as long as the true gospel was proclaimed (vv. 15–18). He was not condoning such motivations, but rather keeping his priorities in the right order and rejoicing in the spread of the gospel.

► Both Daniel and Paul kept their priorities in the right order. How about you? Are your priorities fully biblical? If they need clarifying, consider writing out a personal mission or vision statement. Then discuss it with a friend or family member.

Pray with Us

Paul’s imprisonment and his ministry in jail bring to mind *Today in the Word’s* prison ministry. Your support helps provide this devotional to inmates in more than 600 U.S. jails. Remember these men and women in prayer today.

Questions & Answers

by Dr. Winfred O. Neely, Chair of the Division
of Applied Theology and Church Ministries

Q How is faith different than hope?

A The opening words of Hebrews 11 give us a helpful definition of faith: “Faith is confidence in what we hope for” (Heb. 11:1). Faith gives us inner assurance and confidence, which are different than mere human hopefulness. Through faith things that are in the future, things that God promised to us, become real and substantial for us in the present. “What we hope for” refers to the wonderful and glorious realities that God has promised to us. They are in the future; they are coming. We are anticipating them. Through faith these things become real and substantial for us in the present, giving us inner assurance and confidence about their reality. Because we have faith, we are able to live our lives and make daily decisions in light of God’s promises to us.

Q What does the Bible mean when it says faith is “assurance about what we do not see” (Heb. 11:1)?

A This part of our “faith definition” implies that there are some realities we are not able to see with our physical sight. Our visible world, the world we can touch, see, and

smell, is not the whole of our reality. But we know that there is an unseen and invisible reality. Even though we are incapable of perceiving this reality with our physical eyes, it is real, it has an existence. Faith is the means by which we are able to see and experience that invisible order. Just like our physical sight gives us convictions about the reality of the physical world, so faith gives us conviction about the reality of the unseen world. It is stunning to consider that faith sees God! Faith contemplates the eternal order. Since God Himself is the ultimate and supreme unseen reality, faith enables us to see God (Heb. 11:27). Faith reminds us that our temporal circumstances are not the whole of our experience.

Q I heard it mentioned in a sermon that Christians should do all things without complaining. Is this actually a command from God Himself or an expression of legalism?

A You heard correctly. Philippians 2:14 gives us a bold imperative: Do all things without grumbling or arguing. In some of our English Bible versions, the word *grumbling* is translated as “complaining.” Grumbling is rooted in an attitude

“In a world that no longer knows how to engage in civil and respectful discourse, the church should be an example of how to use God’s gift of language in a redemptive way.”

of resentment toward God about life circumstances. Even though the resentment is Godward, we often express our displeasure with negative comments about other people, most often behind their backs. Ironically, this grumbling drips from the redeemed lips of God’s people, even in the hallways and parking lots of churches. Some Christians may underestimate the damage that complaining does, but it hinders the cause of Christ and hurts people in the process.

Q What does the word *arguing* mean in Philippians 2:14?

A In contrast with grumbling, arguing (sometimes translated as “disputing”) is open and overt verbal contention, arguments, and sharp exchanges. Disputes are rooted in *pride* and a divisive spirit. They lack Christian civility and respect. Arguing involves verbal assault and verbal hitting below the belt. Apparently, believers in Philippi were engaged in fighting with one another on a regular basis and they were hurting the life and public testimony of the church. Some of these men and women, who were in eternal relationship with God through faith in Christ, were argumentative and

contentious. There is no place for this behavior among the people of God. The force of the imperative is literally to stop an action already in progress. God commands His people to stop the complaining and the disputing. In a world that no longer knows how to engage in civil and respectful discourse, the church should be an example of how to use God’s gift of language in a redemptive way.

Q The Psalms describe God as “good” (Ps. 86:5). I often think of “good” as somewhat average (the meal was good, but not excellent). What does “good” mean when used to describe God?

A To say that God is good means that He is kind, gracious, benevolent. By nature, God is cordial, courteous, and ready to bless. Not only is He the most powerful, most holy, and only wise, God is the best being in the universe! God is infinite, unique, and unrivaled in His goodness. The statement that God is good is one of the most glorious and foundational assertions about God’s character in Scripture (Ps. 100:5; 118:1, 29; 119:68). Therefore, it is wise to begin our thinking about God with the biblical idea that God is essentially good. ■

The Triumph of the Cross

Read Hebrews 12:1–3

For the joy set before him he endured the cross.—Hebrews 12:2

Christ's death on the cross was an amazing act of sacrificial love. But was it joyful? Why does Hebrews 12 say that Jesus endured the cross "for the joy set before him" (v. 2)? Pastor and theology professor Geoff Holsclaw explained that in this verse *joy* refers to the fact that Christ was able to share with us, as believers, the delight experienced eternally within the Trinity. Through Him, we experience the joy that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit share in one another's presence.

Because of this, Jesus was willing to endure the physical and spiritual agony of crucifixion: "He endured the cross, scorning its shame." The cross in Jesus' day was not a religious symbol, but a tool for executing criminals. God's purpose for the crucifixion was thus a well-hidden mystery. If "the rulers of this age," both human and demonic, had understood, "they would not have crucified the Lord of glory" (1 Cor. 2:8). When Jesus died on the cross, they thought He'd failed and they'd won, but the reverse was true!

On the cross, Jesus accomplished our salvation. That's why He's called the "pioneer and perfecter of faith" (v. 2). "Pioneer" has also been translated as "founder" (ESV), "author" (NKJV), and "source" (CSB). All variations of this title affirm that He is the "beginning and the firstborn from among the dead" (Col. 1:18). Jesus lived a perfect life and perfectly accomplished His mission from the Father. Therefore, He's the perfect model for us (v. 3). Based on what He did, we should live our own lives with persevering faith, as others before us have done (v. 1). We must throw off sin and lesser priorities and fix our eyes on Jesus. Because He lives, we do not grow weary or lose heart. Because He did not fail, our victory is assured!

► If you haven't already memorized Hebrews 12:1–3, why not learn this powerful passage by heart today? Memorizing Scripture is an important spiritual discipline. As Psalm 119:11 says: "I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you."

Pray with Us

Today, as we read about Jesus' victory on the cross, praise Him for His sacrifice and our salvation. Pray that we will keep our eyes on Jesus, and not on our failures and mistakes.

God's Steadfast Mercy

Read Genesis 4:1–16

*It desires to have you,
but you must rule over it.—Genesis 4:7*

The “snowball effect” describes how one sin leads to another. For example, a child steals a cookie, then lies to her mother about it. A man gossips about his boss, then tries to cover it up. A woman cheats on her taxes, then rationalizes it by saying, “Everybody does it.” The “snowball effect” is at work in today’s story. Cain’s sin began with bad worship. His offering somehow showed a lack of faith or a lack of respect for God (vv. 3–4), leading to the sins of anger and jealousy (v. 5). God mercifully intervened to warn Cain to repent and “do what is right” (vv. 6–7).

But the “snowball effect” continued. Cain carried out the premeditated murder of his brother Abel (v. 8). God mercifully intervened again, implicitly giving Cain an opportunity to confess (v. 9). Instead, he lied (v. 10). This led to God’s just wrath and a punishment (vv. 10–12). Even then, Cain’s response was sinful. He regretted the consequences but

expressed no remorse for any of his sins (vv. 13–14). Once again, God responded with mercy: He tempered the judgment so that Cain would not be murdered for revenge (v. 15).

This section of our month’s study focuses specifically on sinful failures, dealing with them from the perspective that these are occasions for God’s gifts of forgiveness and hope. If we choose to repent, He will forgive. If we stubbornly continue to choose rebellion, as Cain did, even then the faithful mercy of the Lord will be magnified and glorified! “Who is a God like you, who pardons sin and forgives the transgression of the remnant of his inheritance? You do not stay angry forever but delight to show mercy” (Mic. 7:18).

► Pride urges us to double down on our sin. Rather than confess, we allow sin to control what happens next (v. 7). If this describes you today, don’t make things worse—turn to the Lord and let Him cleanse you from your own mess.

Pray with Us

Is it difficult for you to repent of your sin? Remember that our sinful failures are occasions for God’s gifts of forgiveness and hope to work in our lives. Come to Him! He delights “to show mercy” (Mic. 7:18).

Suffering Consequences

Read Numbers 14:17–38

The LORD our God is merciful and forgiving, even though we have rebelled against him.—Daniel 9:9

Even after God forgives our sinful failures, there may be lingering consequences. On the 150th anniversary of the Southern Baptist Convention in 1995, the denomination officially lamented and repudiated its slaveholding history. Pledging to work toward racial reconciliation, they apologized “for condoning and/or perpetuating individual and systemic racism in our lifetime; and we genuinely repent of racism of which we have been guilty.” Our sinful failures can affect others, sometimes for years to come. In today’s narrative, Joshua and Caleb were condemned to wander in the wilderness with their fellow Israelites, even though God promised to spare their lives and allow them to enter the promised land.

Joshua and Caleb themselves had done nothing wrong. Their faith and obedience were exemplary. However, the other ten spies and the people made the sinful choice to decline to enter Canaan. In doing so, they disobeyed the Lord and showed a deplorable lack of faith. Joshua

and Caleb, on the other hand, had argued against the nation’s decision so forcefully that they’d been threatened with death by stoning (14:10).

Joshua and Caleb did what was right. But they were members of a community that chose to do what was wrong (v. 35). As a result, they suffered consequences for the nation’s collective sin. Specifically, they, along with the next generation, spent 40 years wandering in the desert because of the people’s disobedience (v. 34). God punished the people, but less than they deserved (vv. 20–23). And He continued to faithfully protect and provide for them during their wanderings, including the daily provision of manna.

► Our sin, even when forgiven, can have consequences, for ourselves and for others. Daniel is another Bible character who did what was right but who was negatively affected by the sins of his community. He responded with confession and intercessory prayer (Dan. 9:1–19). How can we follow his example today?

Pray with Us

Today’s devotional tells us of God’s provision for His people Israel during their wanderings in the desert. Think about your own “desert wanderings,” and thank the Father for His protection and deliverance.

Failure and Hidden Sin

Read Joshua 7

*He will bring to light what is hidden
in darkness.—1 Corinthians 4:5*

One of the most common “hidden” sins of our time is pornography. Research says it accounts for at least 30 percent of all data transferred across the Internet. In 2018, more than 5.5 billion hours of pornography were consumed by one website alone. Every month, these sites receive more regular traffic than Netflix, Amazon, and Twitter combined. But one day, just as happened in today’s story, God will bring all such hidden sins to light.

In today’s passage, Achan is in the “failure” spotlight. What had he done? Following the victory at Jericho, he took for himself some of the “devoted things” (v. 1). Culturally, soldiers were entitled to the spoils of war. But spiritually, the Israelite army had been commanded not to do so in this case. The plunder belonged to God. Achan chose to disobey the Lord’s command, essentially stealing from God and concealing the evidence (v. 11). To make matters worse, he didn’t confess until it had been revealed he was the guilty man (vv. 20–21).

Achan’s sin was more than individual. God had warned beforehand against this specific sin and described the consequences for Israel (Josh. 6:18–19). Achan’s theft violated the covenant and therefore carried national consequences (v. 15). For five pounds of silver, one-and-a-quarter pounds of gold, and a Babylonian robe, he’d earned a world of trouble. He and his family (who probably knew of his crime) were justly stoned to death, a punishment that also accomplished national cleansing (vv. 25–26). Collective responsibility works both ways. Yesterday, Joshua and Caleb suffered some of the consequences of the nation’s sinful failure. Today, the nation suffered some of the consequences of an individual’s sinful failure.

► Today’s reading is a stern reminder to confess any hidden sins. One important thing to remember is how much God hates sin. He’s absolutely holy. Another is that these sins are not really hidden. God already knows all about them.

Pray with Us

Today’s Scripture passage warns about the consequences of sinful failures and reminds us to confess hidden sin. As we come to God in prayer, praise Him for our freedom and forgiveness in Christ.

Sins of Omission

Read James 4:13–17

If anyone, then, knows the good they ought to do and doesn't do it, it is sin for them.—James 4:17

We tend not to regard sins of omission as real sins or real failures. But they are, as is clearly taught in the book of James. Teaching on faith and good deeds, James, the pastor of the Jerusalem church, gave a striking example: What if you knew a person who lacked basic needs such as food and clothing? You greeted them warmly, wished them well, and continued on your way. But what good did it do them? None! “In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead” (James 2:17). Notice that he doesn’t say such faith is *mediocre*—it is dead. Useless. A complete waste of time.

James illustrates this example in the context of an ordinary activity—making plans (v. 13). A businessperson preparing for a profit-making business trip is perfectly normal, right? Within a biblical worldview, though, what’s missing is any acknowledgment of the brevity and unpredictability of life (v. 14). The Bible teaches that life is

like a “fleeting shadow” (Ps. 144:3–4). We should acknowledge that God is sovereign over all of life, even our plans. Saying “If it is the Lord’s will” is a conscious choice to recognize and submit to that sovereignty (v. 15).

The deeper sin here is pride. When we announce our plans as if they were a sure thing, without acknowledging our limits or the sovereignty of God, it amounts to boasting (v. 16). The sin here doesn’t lie in what is said, but in what is *not* said. Verse 17 goes on to define a “sin of omission”: “If anyone, then, knows the good they ought to do and doesn’t do it, it is sin for them.” That’s a high standard!

► This passage contains its own pair of applications: First, the next time you make plans, remember to take an “if it is the Lord’s will” attitude. Second, remember to confess sins of omission as part of your regular prayer times.

Pray with Us

Looking at your life, do you submit all your plans to the Lord? Today’s passage from James teaches us to take an “if it is the Lord’s will” attitude. Ask, and He will help you trust and rely on Him more.

Against You Only

Read Psalm 51:1–17

Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love.—Psalm 51:1

Do you ever feel torn between repentance and praise? Pondering this issue, Bible scholar Michael E. Travers explained: “It is this tension between guilty sinner and righteous God that creates the paradox of praise in the penitential psalms. . . . When God forgives the sinner for his personal sins, it is only to be expected that the speaker should break forth in intense praise to the God who forgives him.”

Psalm 51 is a great example of this tension between repentance and praise. David had failed in dramatic fashion by committing both adultery and murder (2 Samuel 11). When he finally repented (2 Samuel 12), he wrote this psalm. True repentance involves at least five ingredients seen here: (1) An acute consciousness of and sorrow over specific sins (vv. 3, 17); (2) An understanding that all sin is first and foremost against God (v. 4); (3) An understanding of and sorrow over our general sinfulness (v. 5); (4) A strong faith in and desire for God’s love and mercy as our only hope (v. 1); and (5) A strong and urgent desire to

be cleansed and transformed by God (vv. 1–2, 7–12, 14).

David didn’t deserve forgiveness, but he knew he could count on God’s mercy. This joy-filled anticipation caused him to break forth in praise (vv. 13–15). David failed, but God never fails, and David desired to proclaim God’s “unfailing love” and “great compassion” or “abundant mercy” (v. 1, ESV) to all who would listen. The covenant God had made with David (June 5) looks even more amazing now. God knew that David would sin. He knew Solomon would be the son of Bathsheba. In His promises to David, then, God—though only He knew it at that time—had pre-promised to bring blessing out of David’s future failure.

► Do you ever include music or singing as part of your personal devotions? Today, we suggest listening to or singing the classic song, “Create in Me a Clean Heart, O God” (drawn from verses 10–12) as an appropriate and worshipful response to Psalm 51.

Pray with Us

Coming to the Lord in prayer today, we ask Him to give us pure hearts, a desire for righteousness, and the ability to flee from sin. We also thank Him for His mercy to all who failed and then came to Him.

Failing Jesus

Read Luke 22:31–62

*Lord, you know all things;
you know that I love you.— John 21:17*

When we think of Peter, disciple of Jesus, we often remember how he denied knowing Jesus three times after the crucifixion. But before we consider his failure, we also want to emphasize that Peter finished well. According to tradition—and as Jesus hinted in John 21:18–19—Peter was martyred for his faith by crucifixion. When the time came, Peter said he wasn't worthy to die in the same manner as Christ, and so he asked to be nailed to his cross upside-down. What God-glorifying humility!

As we read in today's passage, Peter failed his Lord by denying Him three times. He failed even though Jesus had directly warned him (Luke 22:34) and prayed for him (v. 32). He failed despite specifically declaring he would remain loyal even if Jesus faced prison and death (v. 33). He failed not once but three times in a row (vv. 56–60). At the very moment the rooster crowed, his eyes met Jesus' from across a courtyard (vv. 60–61). No wonder "he went outside and wept bitterly" (v. 62).

Why would Jesus want a disciple like that? Yet in John 21:15–19, Jesus mercifully forgave and restored Peter, despite his colossal failure. His three questions and affirmations beautifully balance Peter's three previous denials. Peter didn't have to earn his way back. Jesus' love covered it all. He didn't just restore Peter to fellowship, He called him to a lifetime of pastoral ministry!

What's more, guided by the Spirit, Peter told his story to others. Anyone who has heard or read the Gospels—that is, the entire church through all of history!—knows how badly Peter failed, and how perfectly Christ loved him and loves us. To God be the glory!

► Do you ever fear that your failure is so bad that God cannot forgive you? The apostle Paul asks, "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?" The answer? No one, not even we ourselves, can do that! Take heart, be encouraged—we are "more than conquerors through him who loved us" (Rom. 8:35–39).

Pray with Us

Today's story of Jesus' forgiving and restoring Peter reassures us of God's love. We can indeed take heart, be encouraged, and thank our Savior. Nothing can separate us from His love!

Failure to Live the Gospel

Read Galatians 2:7–16

They were not acting in line with the truth of the gospel.—Galatians 2:14

Even after Peter’s life-changing restoration by Christ, he remained human. That means he was also not exempt from additional failures. One day, while Peter was praying on a roof in Joppa, God gave him a vision. Peter saw a sheet full of unclean animals being lowered from heaven and was told to eat them (see Acts 10). Horrified, he refused, and was rebuked, “Do not call anything impure that God has made clean.” The vision repeated three times. God was communicating to him that the gospel was not only for the Jews but also for the Gentiles.

In today’s reading, Paul confronts Peter (here called *Cephas*) for failing to live out the gospel. What was Peter’s sin (vv. 11–13)? He’d gone to minister to the church in Antioch, which included Gentile believers. He shared a meal with them, which was against Jewish regulations about ceremonial purity but which showed obedience to his “sheet” vision from God. As Paul summed it up: “There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave

nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal. 3:28). When some envoys from the Jerusalem church arrived, Peter stopped having meal fellowship with Gentiles. They were legalists or at least unenlightened about God’s inclusion of the Gentiles in His plan. His fear of what these men might think was sadly influential and led others astray. In short, he failed the gospel.

Paul was compelled to confront him (vv. 14–15). Since the gospel is about justification by faith, not by law or works, Peter had made a sinful choice. We’re not told the rest of the story, but it seems safe to assume that Peter responded humbly and correctly, since their relationship remained healthy.

► Aren’t you thankful that our God is a God of second chances? And of third, fourth, fifth . . . ! His grace never runs out. We should never take it for granted. That doesn’t mean we should keep sinning, but we can rejoice that our failures cannot stop His love!

Pray with Us

Praise the Lord! Even when we feel we’ve failed Him, He always gives us second chances. His grace is not limited! Pray against discouragement and Satan’s lies about God’s love for us.

The Unfailing Nature of God

Read Isaiah 51:1–6

*My salvation will last forever,
my righteousness will never fail.—Isaiah 51:6*

Entropy is the natural tendency for things to become more and more disorganized. The second law of thermodynamics describes it as matter’s tendency to lose energy and decline into disorder when left to itself. My sock drawer is the perfect example of entropy! My neatly paired socks seem to disintegrate overnight into a jumbled collection of random single socks.

Entropy is a property of everything in the universe. Everybody is changing . . . except God. He doesn’t change; He never fails. This final section of our month’s study contrasts our human weakness with God’s absolutely trustworthy nature. Scripture affirms this again and again: “Every promise [of God] has been fulfilled; not one has failed” (Josh. 23:14). “His compassions never fail” (Lam. 3:22). “No word from God will ever fail” (Luke 1:37). This is why Moses said: “He is the Rock, his works are perfect, and all his ways are just. A faithful God who does no wrong, upright and just is he” (Deut. 32:4).

Today’s passage asserts: “ My righteousness will never fail” (v. 6). God as the speaker in these verses reminds His people of His attributes, including His constancy. The phrase “the rock from which you were cut” describes His choice of Israel as His special people (v. 1). It’s also a prompt to remember God’s faithfulness throughout their history (v. 2). What could they expect in the future? More of the same, because God is the same.

He comforts, shows compassion, and changes bad to good (v. 3). His truth and justice will be seen (v. 4). His righteousness and salvation will win (vv. 5–6). Verse 6 contrasts creation’s temporality with our eternal, unchanging God. Nature, the most permanent thing we know, will “wear out like a garment” (entropy), but God’s “salvation will last forever.”

► God’s unchanging nature is our rock-solid source of hope. Encourage yourself with this truth today by reading Psalm 62:5–8 aloud. No matter what you’re facing, you can rely on the Lord!

Pray with Us

We invite you to reflect on the powerful words from Isaiah in today’s key verse. May God’s eternal salvation, righteousness, and His unchanging nature be your source of confidence and hope.

When Life Fails Us

Read Habakkuk 3:16–19

*Though the fig tree does not bud . . .
I will rejoice in the LORD.—Habakkuk 3:17–18*

“I went to sleep with gum in my mouth and now there’s gum in my hair and when I got out of bed this morning I tripped on the skateboard and by mistake I dropped my sweater in the sink while the water was running and I could tell it was going to be a terrible, horrible, no good, very bad day.” So begins the classic children’s book by Judith Viorst, *Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day*. We’ve all experienced days, weeks, maybe even years when everything goes wrong. But the unchanging nature of God means we can rejoice and worship even during those times. When everything crumbles, even then (especially then!) we can say: “I will be joyful in God my Savior. The Sovereign LORD is my strength” (vv. 18–19).

What could go wrong is vividly described (vv. 16–17). Babylon will conquer Judah as part of God’s judgment (Hab. 1:5–11). But God has guaranteed that their turn will come. Because he trusts in the Lord,

Habakkuk can “wait patiently” for that day. Even if the fig tree doesn’t bud, the olive crop fails, and the fields are barren, God is faithful. Even if there are no sheep or cattle in the pens, he will rely on the Lord.

The word “yet” in verse 18 indicates a contrast, and the prophet’s response overflows with faith (vv. 18–19). Despite these images of hardship and disaster, he will rejoice in the Lord. God is all-powerful and sovereign. There’s no way He will fail. His promises are as good as kept. Failure and success are not about us or circumstances. We stand on a mountaintop with feet like a deer, that is, with God we’re secure and victorious!

► Try writing a personal paraphrase of verses 17–19 from today’s reading. Fig trees not budding might become your basement flooding, for example. Make the situations and pictures personal, so that the joy in God also becomes personal!

Pray with Us

In your life, what may be the fig tree that doesn’t bear fruit? No matter what trials you’re going through, be encouraged. God is faithful and He will take you through. Thank Him in prayer today!

Joy When We Fail

Read Psalm 73

*As for me, it is good
to be near God.—Psalm 73:28*

On his album *American Prodigal*, Christian musician David Crowder sings: “Troubles of this world, will wither up and die / That river of tears made by the lonely, someday will be dry / There’s gonna be, a great rejoicing / There’s gonna be, a great rejoicing.” Despite troubles and failure, joy in the Lord is always the right choice!

Asaph began Psalm 73 by announcing his topic: God’s goodness (v. 1). The psalmist, however, confesses that he had lost his grip on this truth. His feet “had almost slipped; I had nearly lost my foothold” (v. 2). How? He had become envious. The wicked looked like they were prospering, and God seemed to be doing nothing (vv. 3–12). Why pursue righteousness if it only brings problems (vv. 13–14)?

Asaph’s faith may have faltered, but he didn’t speak out and lead others astray. Worship helped him realize his error and revive his faith (vv. 15–17). His error was to take the

troubling phenomena he saw as the whole truth. Ultimately, God will make sure that the wicked receive justice (vv. 18–20, 27). God has promised it and His nature is perfectly just.

With a wrong view of God, the psalmist failed. He was ignorant and bitter. He misinterpreted what he saw. He acted like a “brute beast” rather than a believer made in God’s image (vv. 21–22).

By contrast, with a right view of God, Asaph found guidance, strength, and fulfillment through his relationship with the Lord (vv. 23–28). His song took on a new theme: “God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever” (v. 26).

► It is helpful to be honest about our failure . . . both with ourselves and before God. Today, consider those times in life when you have failed Him. Rather than sinking into despair, and acting like a “brutal beast”—let God turn your disappointment and fear into joy.

Pray with Us

Join us as we pray the beautiful words from today’s Scripture reading, Psalm 73: “But as for me, it is good to be near God. I have made the Sovereign LORD my refuge; I will tell of all your deeds.”

What Elijah Needed

Read 1 Kings 19:1–18

*I lie down and sleep; I wake again,
because the LORD sustains me.—Psalm 3:5*

Are you having trouble sleeping? A “sound” pillow advertises itself as the solution. It looks like a regular pillow but includes two speakers inside. The pillow is comfortable (you don’t feel the speakers) and you can listen to music as you drift off to sleep. Elijah could have used one of these. He was tired and burned out. But why? Shouldn’t he have felt successful? He’d just won the confrontation on Mount Carmel (1 Kings 18). Fire from the Lord had fallen from heaven. The pagan priests had been killed. The people of Israel had returned to the Lord.

Yet sometimes after a high comes a crash. For whatever reasons—there’s more to it than Jezebel’s threat (v. 2)—Elijah felt down and depressed. The physical causes were straightforward (vv. 4–8). He needed rest and food. He slept soundly under a broom bush, and God twice sent an angel to him with bread and water.

Spiritually, Elijah was experiencing a crisis of faith (vv. 9–14). The faithless Israelites had rejected the covenant.

His prophetic ministry seemed useless. Given what had happened on Mount Carmel, these feelings weren’t logical, but that’s often the way it is during depression. Elijah went to Mount Horeb (Sinai), looking to God for answers. And the Lord did reveal Himself—not through the wind, the earthquake, or the fire, but in a “gentle whisper” (v. 12).

Elijah’s despair also had a social dimension (vv. 15–18). He felt alone, vulnerable, and persecuted. God told him there were still 7,000 true worshipers. He also gave him a young prophet, Elisha, to mentor. And He gave him work to do (kings to anoint). God was saying, in essence: Just be faithful. I’m taking care of everything.

► Which of these three areas—physical, spiritual, or social—is currently your area of greatest need? Once you decide, ask God to encourage you by meeting your needs and revealing Himself to you in a special way.

Pray with Us

In today’s Bible passage, God revealed Himself to Elijah in a “gentle whisper.” During your prayer time, ask: How does God speak to me? Do I recognize His gentle whisper? Do I follow His leading?

Doubt and Failure

Read **John 20:19–31**

But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God.—John 20:31

Four million people, mostly in southwestern India, call themselves “Thomas Christians.” They trace their roots back to the apostle Thomas—the same “doubting Thomas” in today’s reading. Tradition says Thomas went as a missionary to India in 52 A.D. and was martyred in 72 A.D. The resulting “Thomas Christians” are one of the oldest non-Western Christian groups in the world. What a powerful reminder that once Thomas had his doubts answered, he was quite a force for the kingdom of God!

After His Resurrection, Jesus appeared to His disciples in a locked room. He showed them the scars in His hands and side, and they knew it was really Him. Thomas was absent on that occasion, however, and when the other disciples told him the news, he responded: “Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe” (v. 25). Thomas’s skepticism was actually quite rational. Given the natural impossibility of a dead

person coming back to life, he was demanding evidence. When Jesus next appeared, Thomas was present. Christ commanded him, “Stop doubting and believe,” and Thomas responded in faith, “My Lord and my God!” (vv. 27–28). Confronted with the evidence, Thomas immediately surrendered his doubt.

If we cling to doubt, as we learned back on June 4, it’s a mark of immature faith (see Rom. 14:23) or sinful mistrust in God’s character. But there’s also a kind of doubt—found often in the Psalms, for example, as well as here—that takes its questions straight to the Lord. That’s the best strategy, since only He can answer them! This episode is recounted not only for Thomas’s faith but also for ours (v. 31)!

► Do you have doubts about the validity of the Christian faith? Do you know someone else who struggles? *The Case for Christ*, the bestselling book by former atheist Lee Strobel, will help answer questions and strengthen your faith.

Pray with Us

Remember that doubt is not sinful in itself. The risen Christ who reassured Thomas encourages us as well. Come to Christ in prayer and greet Him with Thomas’s words: “My Lord and my God!”

Turned Upside Down

Read 1 Corinthians 1:18–31

The weakness of God is stronger than human strength.—1 Corinthians 1:25

Educator Michael Bycraft argues that failure can be a valuable experience for children. He explains: “If we have always taught our kids that every test must be an A+, then how do we support them when it isn’t?” He argues there’s a better approach: “Failure is a gift. Setbacks, changes and struggles are an essential part of learning.” Failure gives us all an opportunity to learn. As believers, it helps to realize that God’s views of wisdom and strength are often the reverse of our own (vv. 18–20, 25). Human wisdom is foolishness to the Lord, while God’s wisdom looks like foolishness to the world. Similarly, human strength is weakness to the Lord, while God’s strength looks like weakness to the world.

The ultimate example of this is the “message of the cross.” Traditionally, a cross is a symbol of failure and death, but God used it to achieve victory and life for all who believe. The Jewish people wondered how Christ’s death could possibly

show God’s power. And Greeks saw claims of miracles, especially the Resurrection, as nonsense (see Acts 17:32). Only those “whom God has called” see the reality here of God’s power and wisdom (v. 24).

Additional evidence for this God’s upside-down perspective is seen in the lives of believers (vv. 26–31). Paul reminded the Corinthians (and also us) that God does not choose us for our wealth, social status, intelligence, or other qualities. God’s selections may seem unlikely—we are all “in Christ Jesus” because of God’s grace, not our merit. In order to see failure and success through God’s eyes, we must understand and live according to this upside-down truth!

► We invite you to do today what Paul asked the Corinthians to do: “Think of what you were when you were called” (v. 26). What did you value? How did you live? Where would you be today without the good news of Christ?

Pray with Us

Paul’s words, “Think of what you were when you were called” (1 Cor. 1:26), prompt our prayer of gratitude: Lord Jesus, we praise you for your salvation, for taking us from darkness into your light, and for giving us beauty for ashes!

God's Love Never Fails

Read 1 Corinthians 13

The greatest of these is love.—1 Corinthians 13:13

In his famous sonnet, William Shakespeare praised the steadfast nature of love: “Love is not love/
Which alters when it alteration
finds,/Or bends with the remover
to remove./O no! it is an ever-fixed
mark /That looks on tempests and is
never shaken;/It is the star to every
wandering bark [ship].” In simpler
words, true love is like the North Star,
a firm reference point for navigating
the storms of life. In today’s reading,
Paul contrasts human love with God’s
love. This famous chapter begins
by proclaiming the value of love as
the most important Christian virtue
(vv. 1–3). No matter how spectacular
a spiritual gift is (1 Corinthians 12),
it’s worthless without love.

Key qualities of love are then
presented (vv. 4–8). You will notice
that some describe what love looks
like in action, what it does. For
example, “love is patient,” “rejoices
with the truth,” and “always hopes.”
Then we learn what love does *not*
do, for example, love “does not
envy,” “is not self-seeking,” and

“keeps no record of wrongs.” Finally,
1 Corinthians 13 explains how love
is intertwined with our growing to
spiritual maturity (vv. 9–12). While
spiritual gifts are temporary, love
is eternal.

The bottom line? “Love never
fails” (v. 8). This makes sense, since
God never fails and God is love (1
John 4:8). We know human love fails
all the time. Despite our best efforts,
we fall short of loving in a pure and
consistent way. But not God’s love.
It has never failed! Never. Not even
once, in all of history. We can rejoice,
then, that we are eternally, unfaithfully
loved by God. No failure on our part
can remove us from His love. And
because of this, we can and should
love one another: “We love because
he first loved us” (1 John 4:19).

► Consider the way you show love
and the way you experience God’s
love? How can we cultivate such love
in our own lives? By imitating Christ,
the perfect example of love. Consider
today how you can express God’s love
to someone in your life.

Pray with Us

First Corinthians 13 presents a beautiful picture of God’s love. Pray through the
qualities of love in this chapter, asking God to increase the love in your heart.

God Never Fails

Read Genesis 50:1–21

*You intended to harm me,
but God intended it for good.—Genesis 50:20*

Do we truly believe that God never fails? Our view of success and failure ultimately depends on what we believe about God and His sovereignty. If God is sovereign, we can trust the good and bad moments of our lives to Him. Joseph modeled this rock-solid trust in God. He'd suffered and endured much! First, he'd been sold into slavery by his jealous brothers. Then as a slave in Egypt, he'd been falsely accused and imprisoned. Though he interpreted Pharaoh's dream and gained royal favor, Joseph continued to live in exile, uncertain of how his family was doing or if his father was still alive. These events were difficult and painful.

Throughout all this, though, Joseph held onto his faith in the Lord. When he interpreted the king's dream, he gave God the glory (Gen. 41:16). In Genesis 50, he summed up his story in terms of God's sovereignty, love, and saving purposes. He didn't claim to understand everything, but he did know this: "You intended to harm

me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives" (v. 20).

Joseph's brothers thought in human terms. They wondered if perhaps he'd been biding his time out of respect for their father, and now that Jacob was dead Joseph would take his revenge (v. 15). Joseph's response demonstrated forgiveness, faith, and submission to the Lord. Not only does God's love never fail (see yesterday's study), neither does His sovereignty or His power or any of His other attributes. He can and will perfectly accomplish all His perfect plans. There's no drama or suspense about this. We can stand firm in faith and rest in this truth, assured of the future (Heb. 11:1).

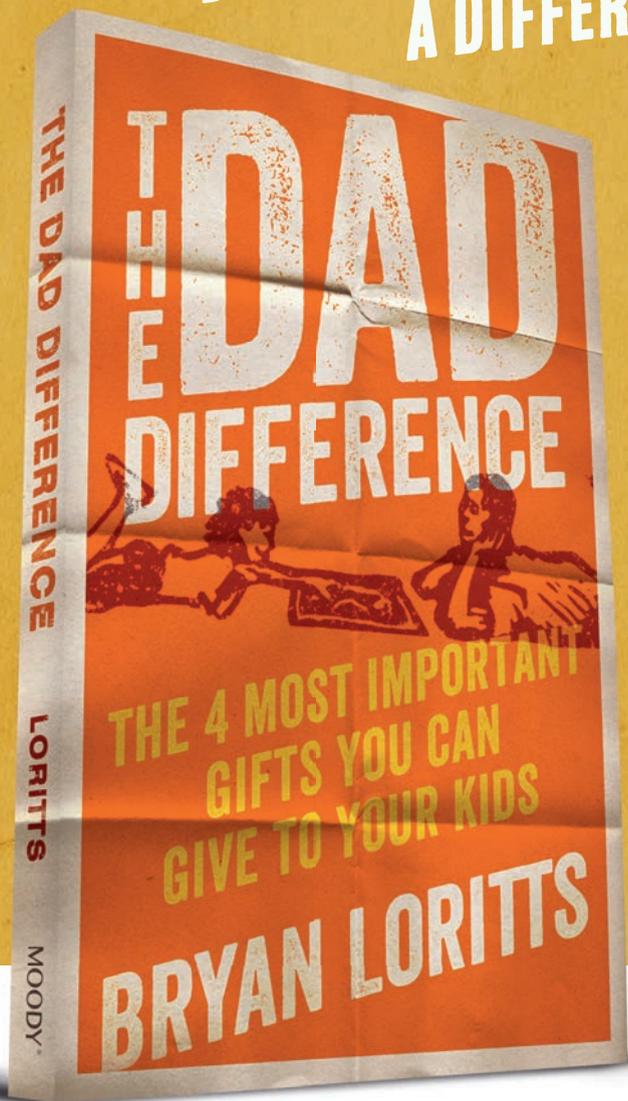
► What are the key lessons you've learned during this study? What have you learned about how God works through failure? How has He done it in your life? How has your idea of success been biblically changed? What will you do differently as a result?

Pray with Us

As we conclude our study this month, we ask the Lord to help us remember the lessons He has taught us about failure, sin, His love, and His forgiveness and mercy. Thank you for studying God's Word and praying with us!

NO DAD IS PERFECT

BUT EVERY DAD CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE

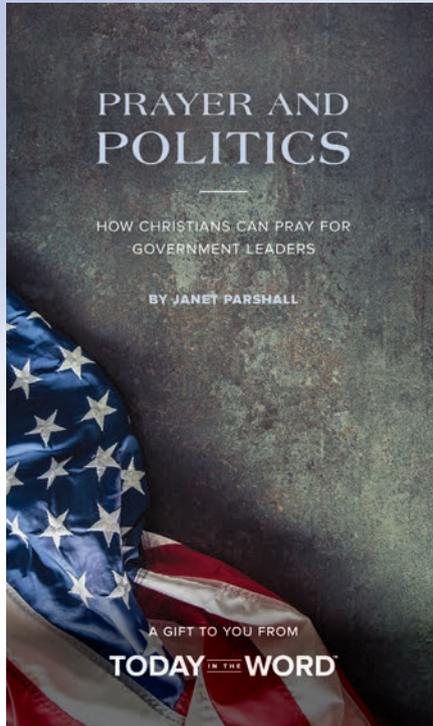


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