

What is Failure?

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[0 : 00] I gave this book to my husband about 40 or so years ago. It's called The Book of Heroic Failures, the official handbook of the Not Terribly Good Club of Great Britain by Stephen Pyle, with cartoons by Bill Tidy. Do you remember Bill Tidy? Well, I had the good sense to write in the inside of the book, Peter definitely not a failure. I think that was probably a wise move.

There are all sorts of amusing tales in there of things that went wrong in all sorts of circumstances, and so it's quite a good read just to pick up from a coffee table, as it were. But as I was preparing for today and reading and reflecting on our passage and many others in the Bible, I came to think that it too is perhaps a book of heroic failures. But the two are very, very different. One is just a bit of a joke, the other is the book of life.

Desmond Tutu said this in an interview in 2017. The pressure to succeed has a lot to do with why people overstep the line. It's a peculiar weakness of Western culture where we have made a fetish of success. We give kudos to people who have succeeded. We don't care in what they've succeeded as long as they've succeeded. The worst thing that can happen to anybody in this cultural environment is to fail. It's a whole minefield. So we're going to concentrate on the Psalm of David and explore failure through that. But do we in our culture tend to chase success and seek to avoid failure? The background to this Psalm, as Tina said, was that

Saul had fled from, sorry, David had fled from Saul who was pursuing him. Saul's jealousy had set him on a course of pursuit of David to harm him. And David, having been to Nod, went on to Ashish, king of Gath. But the servants of Gath. But the servants of Ashish recognized him as the one of whom it was sung, Saul has slain his thousands and David his tens of thousands. And as a result, David took the words to heart and was rather afraid of Ashish, king of Gath. He then pretended to be insane and the upshot was that Ashish didn't want anything to do with him. David was now fleeing the Gaths as well. And out of this comes Psalm 56. David begins by asking for God's mercy and spelling out his problem.

And perhaps that's not a bad place for us to start when we come to God. He says, Be merciful to me, my God, for my enemies are in hot pursuit. All day long they press their attack.

[3 : 16] My adversaries pursue me all day long. In their pride, many are attacking me. David feels beleaguered. Are there times when we feel beleaguered by circumstance?

We can beat ourselves up when things go wrong and we feel a sense of failure. But it strikes me that if that's all we do, we've failed. We can blame others when things go wrong and we have a sense of failure. But if that's all we do, we really have failed.

In verses 3 and 4, David gives us a far better course of action. When I am afraid, I put my trust in you. In God whose word I praise. In God I trust and I'm not afraid.

What can mere mortals do to me? We can get bogged down with a sense of failure and things not going well for us.

So much so that we turn in and only see our own problems. Our own difficulties. And I can give you an example of my own plight over the last few weeks.

[4 : 29] I got a new phone probably about two or three weeks ago now. And I wanted to get everything set up. And most of it got set up very easily, very well.

But it came to the banking mobile app. And I hit a bit of a buffer. And so I gave up. Because it's a joint account, so Peter can do it.

But yesterday I thought, come on Jean, this is getting at you. You've got things to do on the bank account. You've really got to sort this out. And I recalled these verses which I've been pouring over, obviously, for a couple of weeks.

So I brought this verse to mind. When I am afraid, I put my trust in you. And I did. And I said, come on, I've got to get this sorted out. So I started.

And I still seem to be going round in circles. And I put it down. And then I went away. And I came back. Come on, you really, really have got to get this sorted. So I am trusting you, God, to get this sorted.

[5 : 31] So I started again. And then I must have given a wrong answer to one of the questions this automatic person was asking me. And would you believe it? The result was I got to speak to a real person.

Georgia was so lovely. She was so kind. And she sorted me out. So I'm now back up and running. So from failure has come success.

So if we stay bogged down and beleaguered in failure or things getting at us, we maximize our failure and minimize what God can really do for us.

We lose sight of Jesus in it all. And fail to recognize him in every situation, even mobile apps. And it really can be a downward spiral.

But failure doesn't have to define us. I'm sure we can all identify with a sense of failure at some time in our lives. Not the everyday stuff or forgetting this or that or saying the wrong thing at the wrong time.

[6 : 35] But the things that happen, if you let them, could ruin your life for a while at least. Now, this is an example from quite a long time ago. And I remember George Carey, who was then Bishop of Bath and Wells, who had written and produced an audio tape of the very first CTIC Lent group series I went to, saying something like this.

He says, if you're quoting examples, they must be within the last few years. So I apologize for this going back to 1969. He was very wise in that, but sometimes, sometimes.

It was early in 1916, September 69. It was a new school year, a new maths teacher for me. And at the end of the year exams that had just been, I had only achieved 40% in contrast to the previous year where I'd won the maths prize.

It was my first sense, or my first taste, rather, of academic failure. First lesson of the new school year, a new teacher getting to know the class identifies my poor mark with the comment, what happened to you, Miss McNair?

I could quite happily have slid under the desk. But in reality, I don't suppose anyone else in the class remembers that incident now. And in fact, for me, it's very, very hazy.

[7 : 56] But fast forward four years and A-level results day. One pass, one complementary ill level, one fail.

Not enough for what I wanted to do next. But God was on it, in it. So my dad sat me down kindly to help me regroup and started by bringing me Matthew 6, verses 33 and 34.

But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. Therefore, do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself.

Each day has enough trouble of its own. He got me to list the things in my favour. And we worked out a plan of action. Time precludes me from telling you the whole story.

But suffice to say, the new course of my life was, I am sure, much more rewarding and grew me in a way I didn't expect. The message for me, like David, is failure need not define you.

[9 : 04] God wants something rather than has something better for you. Lent is a time to take stock and not just look in on ourselves, but ask God through the Holy Spirit to help us identify areas of our lives where we have taken that wrong course.

And to affirm those areas where we are very definitely on the right course. It's not failure that defines, but faith.

It's holding fast to Jesus when all around seems absolutely hopeless. It's being bold and speaking about what following Jesus means to us and the difference faith in God makes to our lives.

In this book of heroic failures, the Bible, Peter, the Apostle Peter, is often pictured as the one who gets it wrong by jumping in or not owning up to knowing Jesus, as in the denials in the courtyard when Jesus was taken to Caiaphas.

But remember, Jesus' first words to Simon Peter were, Come, follow me, in Mark 1, 17. And his last words to him were, You must follow me, in John 21, verse 22.

[10 : 24] Every step of the way between those two challenges, Peter never failed to follow, even though he often stumbled. Failure need not define you and didn't define Peter.

Isn't that a huge encouragement? We just, sorry, we need to keep following Jesus. We stumble, we get it wrong, but we keep following our master.

Jesus changed Peter's life. He was a new person with new goals and new priorities. He didn't become a perfect person, and he never stopped being Simon Peter.

We may wonder what Jesus saw in Simon. That made him greet this potential disciple with a new name, Peter the Rock.

When Jesus chose his followers, he wasn't looking for models. He was looking for real people. He chose people who could be changed by his love. And then he sent them out to communicate that his acceptance was available to anyone, even to those who often fail.

[11 : 39] We may wonder what Jesus sees in us when he calls us to follow him. But we know Jesus accepted Peter, and in spite of his failures, Peter went on to do great things for God.

Failure need not define us. We can have such a fear of failure that we lose sight of the God who created us, loves us, wants us to know him fully, and to live without fear in his ways.

David's enemies here in the psalm try to get under his skin. They try to bring him down from the pedestal they've put him on. That rings a bit of what we do with our celebrities these days.

They try to bring him down with schemes and conspiracies. They sought to destroy him. As we heard in our prayers, there's a lot going on in our world today.

Where can we see the beginnings of those and identify those behaviours? We talked about the persecuted Christians. We can look on the Open Doors website or the Barnabas Trust website.

[12 : 51] And there's lots of stories. Tim mentioned a few countries. But there are so many countries in the world where it really isn't safe to speak about Jesus.

And yet, and yet, people do. And things happen. But I think also, with media and social media, it's very hard to overcome this notion that we're pursuing success.

It's very hard for our young people to be able to negotiate that. And it's our responsibility to help, to guide them, even if we don't quite understand it ourselves.

One of my neighbours has a daughter in year eight. And she says it's so hard. So very hard when she watches things on TikTok and this, that and the other.

And says, Mum, I need this. You need it? But she's bold enough to say, to try and direct her. But it's exceedingly difficult.

[14 : 05] Technology, as I am not thoroughly a bit of a technophobe, but is a real problem. And I've just read a snippet yesterday in the paper about the father of Molly Russell, has called an Ofcom to be far bolder on regulating technology companies after he met the mother of the murdered teenager, Brianna Gay.

He said, Big Tech was heading in the wrong direction, with bosses resistant to change. Do we want our young people to feel threatened, beleaguered?

Should we not be doing something about it to help them avoid being drawn into these things, which seek to destroy, and yet portray themselves as things that are good?

David recognises what these adversaries of him are trying to do. And he asks God to take note so that his enemies will turn back, knowing that God is on his side.

As he says, Then my enemies will turn back when I call for help. By this I will know that God is for me. Shades of when Paul said, What then shall we say in response to these things?

[15 : 36] If God is for us, who can be against us? In Romans 8.31. It takes boldness to speak for God, for Jesus.

But if we are to live our lives following Jesus, we must take those bold steps. David repeats some of his earlier verses then.

He says, In God whose word I praise, In the Lord whose word I praise, In God I trust and am not afraid. Our hearts may be pounding, but we are not afraid, because we know God is on our case.

David praises God's word. He trusts in God and is therefore not afraid of anyone or anything. It's easier said than done.

But if we keep following Jesus, we stand a chance. Following David's example, we can recognize that the many failings in the world, in our own lives, and the questions I find myself asking are things like, Who do I pay heed to?

[16 : 42] Who do I listen to? Where does my information come from? Is it trustworthy? Is it real? Who do I trust? Who do I really trust?

Can we say amen to, In God whose word I praise, In the Lord whose word I praise, In God I trust and am not afraid.

What can mere mortals do to me? Can we? But David doesn't leave it there. He finishes with thanksgiving, and a commitment to God, and recognizes he has come through this ordeal, and asks to be kept from stumbling.

Then he can walk before God, and in his light, and know life. I am undervoused to you, my God, I will present my thank offerings to you, for you have delivered me from death, and my feet from stumbling, that I may walk before God, in the light of life.

We don't want to stay in the darkness, we want to be in that glorious light. So as we continue our journey through Lent, can we learn to get the notion of failure, into a right perspective?

[18:03] Can we give thanks for God's presence, and bringing us through ordeals? Can we commit again to following Jesus, and to putting his teaching into practice?

Can we? Then we will walk in the light of life with him. Sometimes, we're in danger of maximizing our own failure, and as a result, we minimize the cross.

Did Jesus suffer and die in vain? Was that failure? No. No. And definitely no.

Without the cross, we wouldn't be sitting here today. Without the cross, our faith would be in vain.

When we confess our sin, and we are forgiven by God, we must let it, our confessed sins, go.

Really repent. Don't hang on to it. Turn away from it. Leave it at the cross, and accept his forgiveness. Otherwise, Jesus did suffer and die in vain.

[19:14] The cross is everything. We're heading towards the cross this Lent. Let us put our trust firmly in Jesus, in Jesus, and have no fear, and commit to following him every step of the way this Lent, this Easter, and every day thereafter.

Walk in the light of his presence. Let's do that together. Amen.