

# Overcoming Failure

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[ 0 : 00 ] As we sit, let's bow our heads and pray together. Our loving Heavenly Father, we are so grateful for your word. Our loving Heavenly Father, we are so grateful for your word.

! And we thank you that the Lord Jesus taught that your word is truth. And Father, he claimed that it would be your truth that would set us free.

And so we ask now for your people gathered. That we might discern your truth. And your truth would indeed free us.

That we might become the people, not that we want to be, Lord, but the people you would like us to be. And we pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen.

I want to preach on a verse from the reading that Grace read to us. The disciples decided they would go on a fishing trip.

[ 1 : 05 ] And there were seven of them. And six of them joined Peter. And they got in the boat. And the rather depressing outcome of their first attempt to fish, we read about in verse 3.

They went out and got into the boat. But that night, they caught nothing. I remember watching that series of television programs some years ago on the television about this bloke who had this mad idea for a set of documentaries.

That he would go into the forest flung places of the planet. And what he would do is he would join some of the most primitive people.

And he'd stay with them for a week. I mean, you can imagine what that was like. They nearly killed him, in fact. They gave him some hallucinogenic leaves to chew.

And that nearly did for him. But I remember every night he came in front of camera. And he did a little video. And he would say what he'd been doing.

[ 2 : 18 ] And he said on this particular program. He said, I'm very excited. He said, tomorrow we're going fishing. He said, I'm really keen to find out how these people go about fishing.

He said, and I saw them loading the canoes tonight. He said, I was a little confused because there's no nets and no fishing rods or anything like that. He said, so we'll wait and see. The next minute they're canoeing down the river.

And suddenly there's a bloke at the front. And he's looking into the river. And he tells them to stop.

By the way, these primitive people had a massive outboard motor on the back of their canoe.

So they stop. And this guy sitting there. And you can tell he's very puzzled. Because there's nothing. There's no nets. And these are primitive people.

And suddenly the elder in the boat pulled out a stick of dynamite. Lyt it and threw it in the river. And then they collected all the dead fish off the top.

[ 3 : 24 ] Well, fishing at the time of Peter was a slightly different business. Partly because, of course, dynamite hadn't been invented in that time.

But just so you know this, I mean, it seems like when you're talking about overcoming failure, that at a certain level, going out fishing and not catching any fish is hardly life-changing.

But then you've got to reckon that Peter's livelihood depended on what he caught. And fishermen today is exactly the same.

You know, sometimes they take these big expensive boats out to fish and they don't catch a thing. It was like that then. But, of course, the consequences were probably more serious.

Not only did they not have food for breakfast. But he wouldn't have had any fish left to sell. That would have fed into his livelihood. So it's a serious matter, fishing.

[ 4 : 32 ] And they went out. Now, in 1902, there was a scientist called Karl Popper. And he wasn't born a scientist, obviously, but he became a scientist.

And as he got older, he became more interested in the philosophy of science. In particular, he became very interested in how do we know things are true.

What is the nature of proof? And he came up with a theory. And the theory was based, I think he must have been a natural skeptic.

Because his default in all matters of scientific truth were, you cannot trust human thinking because it's inevitably wrong. And so he developed this theory of proving.

He said that we don't really prove anything. What we do is we find truth by consistently disproving things. It reminds you of that well-known adage by Thomas Edison, who invented the electric light bulb.

[ 5 : 43 ] And he tried and tried and tried to get this light bulb to work. And he could not do it. And a lot of his fellow inventors and scientists were saying to him, it's a flop, you know, give it up.

It's a failure. And his conclusion was, I haven't failed a thousand times, he wrote. I haven't failed a thousand times. He said, what I've done is, I've discovered a thousand ways that this light bulb won't work.

And of course, he invented it. Well, we're talking about overcoming failure today. And I have to say, I'm a little nervous about this.

Partly because I suspect I may be in a classroom full of experts. There'll be very few of you in life who've not experienced failure.

And it's not a great feeling. I mean, I'm not, you know, I don't want to talk to you about kind of superficial failures. Like, you know, I baked a cake and it didn't rise, that sort of stuff. I want to talk to you, and I'll come back to this in a moment, about the kind of more serious failures that can stay with us for life.

[ 6 : 56 ] And rob us of that fullness of life that Jesus promised in John 10 and verse 10. So, in the 1970s, early 1970s, when I was a young businessman, I tried to learn as much as I could.

And I discovered that most of the books in the commercial area of leadership focused on success. One of the most famous books was written by a man called Jim Collins, and it was called From Good to Great.

And Jim was a Harvard researcher, and his interest was, what's the difference between a good company and a great company? And through his research, he tried to isolate some factors, which he thought would make companies go from good to great.

It's all about success. And then, round about the turn of this century, the kind of mood changed. I can't explain to you why the mood changed.

I sort of suspect it's all to do with our kind of grievance, victim, slightly more aware of mental illness. But suddenly, people started to write leadership books about failure.

[ 8 : 17 ] failure. And there were very notes. There's a guy called Matthew Egan who wrote a book called The Failure Foundation. It actually made a foundation which talked about failure.

failure. And then there was John Maxwell's famous book called Failing Forwards. I thought I might write a book at one point about the Church of England called Failing Slowly, but I never got round to it.

So, you've got these books on failure. And of course, there's one big proviso. What's that?

We will learn from our failures. And there's an element of truth in that. It's not guaranteed. But actually, it is true, isn't it, that if we can learn from our failures, we might actually get better at our endeavours.

So, I want to talk to you about overcoming failure, and I want to do it from this passage that we have. I don't know if it could go up on the screen.

[ 9 : 22 ] I'm not quite sure about that. I don't understand technology. Visit to the doctors is a nightmare for me now. So, incidentally, these books on failure sold amazingly well.

John Maxwell's book sold 31 million copies worldwide. I mean, unbelievable.

So, as I said earlier, I don't want to talk to you about superficial failures. I'm not that worried about those of you whose cake didn't rise, or the gift that I carefully curated for my wife, which she truly hated.

No more. And talking about a deeper, kind of more existential failure. What do I mean by that? Well, I mean, the very serious failures that some of you have gone through.

Relationship failure. Always difficult. Marriage or parenting failure. Career failure.

[10:42] I mean, I know people who have failed, and unfortunately, it's defined the rest of their lives. Let me ask you a question. I mean, do you think that's God's intention?

That we would fail, and that we would let it define us for the rest of our lives? I mean, you need to know that if you follow Jesus Christ, your primary identity is not dictated by your failures or your successes.

It's dictated by the grace of God, who's called you to himself. So, I'm talking about these, and of course, oh my goodness, hands up, you know, I'm a PhD in this.

I mean, spiritual failure. My willingness to unforgive. And yet, it was only a few moments ago that Tim encouraged us to pray the Lord's Prayer.

Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us. Well, what about disobedience? Would you put your hand up if I said, have you ever been disobedient in your walk with Jesus?

[12:01] I suspect there wouldn't be many of you. John chapter 14 and verse 15, Jesus said, if you love me, you will obey my commandments.

You will keep my commandments. I must say, I've always kind of wondered about that verse in relation to the assertion that God's love is unconditional.

I mean, the word if is at the beginning of that sentence. If you love me, you will keep my commandments. Indifference. Or again, spiritual failure.

I think this is a huge thing in the 21st century church. Indifference. I'm going to show up on Sunday and I'm going to make sure that the new vicar sees me.

And I'm going to go home wherever I go for the next six days of the week. And somehow it doesn't seem to quite be the same.

[13:04] I am aware that I think the Western church has become, it's almost like we're sleepwalking some of the time. And God knows there's a work out there to be done.

This is not just about getting a tick on the register, friends. This is about believing that our effort together with Christians across this town, Christians across this nation, our effort can change the world.

But here's the point. If the effort's not there, it's unlikely that the change will be there. Remember that church in Laodicea in the book of Revelation and the risen Christ addresses the church in these words.

I know your works. You're neither cold nor hot. Would that you were cold or hot because you are lukewarm. Because you are lukewarm, I will spit you out of my mouth.

I didn't ever imagine that the risen Christ would develop the habit of spitting. But that's what he says.

[14:26] If you're sitting here thinking that if I warm the pews often enough, I'll get a gold watch at the end of it. Friend, with respect, you need to think again.

So let's take a look at this passage and see what we might learn. The first thing I noticed about this passage is failure can make us lose focus.

Verse 4 of chapter 21. We're told there that the disciples saw this person on the beach 100 yards away and they didn't recognise Jesus.

See, I think this is what failure can do. I think if you are starting to define yourself by failure, Jesus is going to fall out of focus in your life.

And I want to ask you, because this is very serious, frankly, that if you've not got Jesus in sharp focus, if he's not just your saviour but your Lord, then I think God might want to speak to you today.

[15:44] And I hope if he does, you won't just go home and put the oven on. But I hope you will think about what God might be saying to you.

I know from the military that nobody who marches with a half-hearted army achieves anything very much.

And half-heartedness within the congregation of Christ's faithful people will achieve similar results. I tell you this many times, and I'll tell you it again, I think about 23,000 people live in Clevedon.

And I reckon, having done the rounds a bit, that maybe on any given Sunday there might be 800 to 1,000 people.

I can't work out the maths on that. But could we agree, we could do better? The thing is, if you've lost focus on Jesus, honestly, it's not even going to matter to you.

[17:00] Our own little church and the friends we talk to, we love worshipping the Lord together. It's all so cosy.

When you lose focus on Jesus, I think you don't just suffer that way, but actually what happens is your cutting edge as a Christian gets blunted.

We need to rediscover our focus on Jesus and the likelihood is you're not going to be able to do that in your own strength.

You will need the Holy Spirit to burn the idea that I am only a spiritual failure if I allow myself to lose focus on Jesus.

The second thing is, I think this issue of failure, the difference between failure and success in this story was that they listened to Jesus.

[18:09] I mean, I did fishing when I was a boy. I mean, I never ever caught anything. And the bottom line is, I'm really glad I didn't because I was terrified.

I didn't want to handle one to take it off the hook. So, you know, my fishing, but I didn't, I wasn't passionate enough about fishing to go out all night.

Right? I never did that. I had other things to do at night rather than go fishing. But these, can you imagine, they've been out all night. All seven of them on this boat and they've not caught a thing. And there they are on the shore. I imagine they're not feeling great. And Jesus tells them that they must get in the boat.

Sorry, they must cast their net again. You wouldn't blame them, would you, if there wasn't a discussion that went something like this?

[19:10] Who's this guy? Who is he to tell us? We're fishermen. We get it. Who's he? They listened to Jesus. Whom, at this stage, they hadn't really recognized.

And they did what he said and they went out and they caught a massive trove of fish. 153 fish.

I mean, that sounds like a good breakfast to me. and I assumed that there'd be some stuff left over for their breakfast. They listened to him.

I tell you something, if you're besotted by your failure, which is a close bedfellow of being besotted about yourself, then it's unlikely that you will ever hear Jesus speak to you.

Why? Because you're not really listening. I wonder if this morning in this church which has seen so much spiritual action over the years, I wonder if that same spirit who motivated that action is going to speak to you.

[20:31] speak, Lord, in the stillness while I think on thee.

Maybe some of you should try it. Try just listening for God and at the end of this message I'll give you some silence in the hope that you might ask God to tell you what you need to know.

The third thing is in verse 6. They didn't just listen to Jesus. They did what he asked them to do.

I know these days that words like obedience and duty are not really terribly in vogue.

But actually I can tell you this. I never met people who just went their own way in life and it ended well. one of the things that I found most difficult in the hundreds of funerals I've taken was that at one time in funerals we just sang hymns and then suddenly the crematorium or the cemetery got a stereo kit so people could choose what they wanted to have played.

[22:07] The most common song that people wanted played when I was a vicar was I did it my way Frank Sinatra and nobody would say that Frank's life ended well.

So there is a response we're not going to be saved by being obedient that's God's grace but this book tells us how God wants us to live and I think we do well to heed that.

And maybe one of the biggest failures I know it's true of my life is our failure in sin. And you know I mean I do some wrong stuff okay and I you know the best thing the devil succeeds with me is not taking it seriously enough.

it's alright you know there are people who are worse than you mate might have to dredge the pit and think about Adolf Hitler and Attila the Hun but of course there are people who are worse than me but that's no excuse.

Ezekiel chapter 18 the Jews are in exile in Babylon you may remember this that they had a massive problem and their problem was they would not accept responsibility for their own sin so they invented this kind of proverb and it went like this the fathers have eaten sour grapes and set the children's teeth on edge right it's a bit cryptic first time round isn't it but what it means is we're not in exile because of anything we've done it was all the fault of our forefathers I tell you I know from my forays into the world of counselling which generally is a great thing but I know that you know

[24:27] I've sat with a lot of people in my life who will not take responsibility responsibility and there's problems with that and one of the problems is if you refuse to take responsibility for your

actions your thoughts your words you will never grow up right simple I think we grow when people give us responsibility and we take responsibility you have responsibility for your life you remember that story that Jesus told about the building of two houses right and both those houses looked exactly the same until the storm came friends I am looking out to see your faces I mean you look different to me but basically you know you look human mostly and

Jesus the strap line of that was build your life on a great foundation he who hears these words of mine says Jesus and puts them into practice is like what a wise man a wise woman who built their house upon the rock that when failure came when the storm came the house stood firm see we don't just need to listen to Jesus we need at the same time to do what he tells us to do and the fourth thing we get from this story is persistence I wouldn't blame those disciples with you if they heard Jesus shout get out there again and cash your nets on the right and they shouted back yeah you know something I wouldn't want to repeat they didn't they did it and

I want to say to you all my life certainly you know being on kind of senior teams of dioceses the thing that's troubled me most is we fail once and we give up we try something out number of churches I know you know they'll give a guy member of church not far from where I live and they decided they'd do a family service and try and attract families in they did it for three months and it didn't work that well and the church was you know I just like you know somebody said the church of England was the conservative party at prayer this was like the Derby and Joan club at prayer and then the vicar left and to be fair I think he was tired he left and a new guy came in we appointed this guy who

I had known for a long while first thing he said is is there a family service well no you know there isn't he started it for three months nothing after two years suddenly the flood gates opened and they were dealing with hundreds certainly tens of new families see I think persistence is a big word in the Christian life in the New Testament remember Jesus was trying to teach his disciples about praying and he gave this extraordinary example he said suppose you're in bed and somebody comes hammering on the door at midnight right I mean that's happened to me it's not fun and you know kind of what are you going to do am I going to get dressed before I go down and put a dressing gown you know all that and

Jesus says you should pray like this keep hammering on the door of heaven until the house owner opens the door and hears your prayer how many of you feel you fail in prayer because you prayed about something a couple of times and it's not happened think about the friend at midnight persistence is a very big New Testament word and we do well to learn it so let me conclude because you're feeling hungry I want to conclude by saying I really want to speak deep into the heart of those of you who've got a failure had a failure in your life and it defines you and you're not sure if there's a way that you can process that failure and become a bigger and better and more grown up person because of it well I want to take issue with you

[ 29 : 55 ] I think we're all redeemable I mean we're redeemable in terms of our sin but we're redeemable in terms of our mistakes and our failures think for a moment about some of the heroes of the bible Moses right within Judaism massive kind of image and revered and Moses killed a man and then he was selected to lead the people out of Israel and then he was disobedient by the waters of Meribah wherever they are God said to him speak to this rock and Moses thought I'm not going to do that you know you give me this rod so he hit the rock twice and it had the desired effect all the water flowed out for the Israelites to drink but because of that God said for your disobedience you will never enter the promised land you think about

King David another greatly revered person within the history of Judaism I mean David started out as a shepherd somehow managed to slaughter a lion then he took on Goliath and killed him I mean whichever way you look at it still murder he gets recognised by the community and anointed as king and the next minute he has a fling with a woman called Bathsheba part of me wants to say but I'm too polite to say it how dare you define yourself by your failure look at the raw material of God's amazing people failure after failure after failure you know anything about the history of revival you know anything about the history of the church

I never knew a church I've known you know I don't know what you make of this but I've known a lot of mega churches spent time with them and these churches interestingly they have one common feature they nearly all catastrophically failed at one point in their history but they didn't give up and you might feel you have catastrophically failed at some point in your history and you have never managed to process it listen you need to get Jesus in focus you need to listen to him not just speak

at him all the time you need to do what he tells you to do and that means you need to familiarize yourself with his word and you need to develop that amazing new testament characteristic persistence you make a mistake for God's sake please don't give up try and learn from him and of course the reason credited to the crowd in

Jerusalem on Palm Sunday where they were shouting statements of praise as Jesus entered the city turned into hatred and the reason that is offered as to by the mood of the church changed is this that they thought Jesus had come to deliver them from the Roman enemies and the crowd on Palm Sunday couldn't understand how the Messiah the great political and military victor ended up being arrested like you when your expectations are let down they felt angry murderously angry and we're in the season of Easter which is the most amazing reminder that God on a cross that looked like a failure we celebrate because the cross is an empty cross because Jesus is alive someone say amen amen

Jesus is alive someone say amen amen Jesus is alive amen big deal is it going to make a big difference to you are you going to make a commitment today to get past your failure and start to walk yet more closely with him and see what happens why don't we pray just in the silence now let's pray that if the Holy Spirit is speaking straight to us right now that Lord give us big ears that we may hear Lord I'm praying for anybody in the house today who's really suffering with this problem of allowing past failures to identify them

[ 35 : 56 ] Lord would you please heal them of that destructive thought now Lord I pray for anybody in this church who knows that their failure is spiritual that they can't forgive that they have very little passion in their soul for the cause of Christ in this world today Lord would you please wake us up help us to see in the words of the old missionaries there's a work to be done and Father I pray that today might make a difference not just in our lives but in our church and in this community Lord you know how difficult we can find it here to find volunteers

Lord would you speak to some people today and Lord in line with what they might be gifted to do would you please help them to step up so Father we love you we bless you we thank you that you've given us the tools that we don't need to define ourselves by failure and now in a few moments of silence let's together listen to God that we might hear him and having heard him we might do what he says and we pray these things in Jesus name Amen