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FAILURE AND HOPE

Luke 22:31-38

By

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Luke Lesson 101

Failure and Hope
Luke 22:31-38

Have you ever thanked God that you weren't around when the Bible was being written, so that your failures were not recorded for all people of all time to read about? Poor Peter was there and everyone knows about his colossal failure. Like Peter, we *all* have failed the Lord, even if our failures are not as widely known. When you fail the Lord, whether it is a colossal fall like Peter's or even if it's a lesser failure, you feel guilty, embarrassed, and depressed. If it's a bad fall, you often wonder if God will ever use you again in His service.

Thank God that the Bible offers hope for those who have failed God. It does not leave us without a way out. Also, thank God that the Bible paints its heroes warts and all. It does not air-brush their blemishes from the record. It lets us see them as men and women like us, who struggled against the same weaknesses and temptations, but who recovered from their sins and failures by God's abundant grace.

I don't know how to rank failures, but Peter's has to be one of the worst. To be the leader among the apostles, to boast that he would go to prison and death with Christ, and then to deny that he even knew Christ, was not just an average, everyday sort of failure! The fact that the Lord would restore Peter and use him on the Day of Pentecost and thereafter shows us His amazing grace and gives us hope when we fail.

When we fail the Lord, His grace points the way back
and gives us hope.

Like Peter, ...

1. We all have failed the Lord.

Let's analyze what was behind Peter's failure.

A. Behind spiritual failure is a spiritual enemy.

Jesus tells Peter that Satan has demanded permission (the verb means to obtain by asking) to sift him like wheat. This reveals

Christ's supernatural knowledge of events before God's throne. It reminds us of the story of Job, where Satan asked God's permission to afflict Job. He wanted to prove that Job followed God for the benefits, but that he would deny God if the benefits were removed. "To sift like wheat" pictures grain running through a sieve, where the head of grain is taken apart. Satan wanted to tear Peter apart and leave him in pieces. Somewhat surprisingly, God granted Satan's request! In His inscrutable purposes, God uses Satan, who thinks that he will achieve his evil purpose, but God overrules him and turns it for His greater purpose of good. Satan is on a leash and can go no further than God allows.

Note that Satan especially goes after those who are in spiritual leadership. The pronoun "you" in verse 31 is plural, pointing to Satan's sifting all the apostles, but Peter as the leader among the apostles is especially singled out. He would fail in the most dramatic way, but God would use his failure after he had recovered to strengthen the others, who also had failed.

The point is, behind the scenes there is an evil spiritual enemy, Satan, who is bent on our destruction. Often we forget or fail to see him. He brought sin into the world by tempting Eve in the garden. He is prowling about like a roaring lion, seeking to devour the faith of God's people (1 Pet. 5:8). Jesus calls him "the ruler of this world" (John 12:31; 14:30; 16:11), a murderer, and a liar, the father of lies (John 8:44). He said that this wicked being snatches the seed of the gospel from hearts so that they may not believe and be saved (Luke 8:12). Paul calls him the god of this world who has "blinded the minds of the unbelieving" (2 Cor. 4:4). He is a powerful, cunning enemy!

J. C. Ryle states, "The world is a snare to the believer. The flesh is a burden and a clog. But there is no enemy so dangerous as that restless, invisible, experienced enemy, the devil" (*Expository Thoughts on the Gospels* [Baker], Luke 11-24, p. 410). That is why the apostle Paul instructs us to put on the full armor of God, so that we can stand against the subtle but powerful schemes of this wicked enemy (Eph. 6:10-20). We are foolish and in danger of failing if we forget about our enemy.

- B. Behind spiritual failure is blindness to our own weakness and to the Lord's warnings of danger.

Peter was foolishly confident in his own commitment to the Lord, so much so that he contradicted Jesus' own words! We often flatter ourselves into thinking, "Others may fall, but I'm strong!" It's interesting that verse 34 is the only time in the gospels that Jesus calls Peter by this name which He gave him. It means "rock." The Lord is gently saying, "Peter, you are a rock only when you rely on Me, not on yourself. You think that you're a rock in yourself, but Peter, you are about to fall."

I believe that the disciples' blindness to their own weakness and to the spiritual danger that lurked just ahead is the point of the difficult verses 35-38. Jesus is telling them that there is a new direction just ahead in light of His impending death and departure. He reminds them of the time when He had sent them out without any provisions, but they did not lack anything. He had provided everything for them, they saw great spiritual victories, and they came back rejoicing that even the demons were subject to them in Jesus' name (10:17). The Lord had smoothed this first experience to give them confidence in their beginning attempts at ministry.

But now Jesus is warning them that the battle is about to heat up in ways that they had never experienced before. They will encounter situations where God would not miraculously provide, and so they needed to make adequate provisions in advance. Jesus' being numbered with the transgressors meant a new level of spiritual conflict. This hour and the power of darkness belonged to the enemy (22:53). The disciples needed to be ready.

So Jesus told the disciples to sell their robe and buy a sword. And, when they produced two swords, He said, "It is enough." What did He mean? In light of Jesus' command to Peter in the garden to put away his sword, and Christ's non-resistance to the Jewish guards (22:53), it is obvious that Jesus was speaking symbolically, not literally, when He told them to buy swords. He was referring to the swords as a symbol of preparation for the intense spiritual conflict just ahead. When the disciples took Jesus literally and produced two swords and He replied, "It is enough," He was dismissing the subject in light of their continuing spiritual dullness. They just didn't get it.

There is one more factor in our text that shows that the disciples were spiritually blind and dull: They did not understand that

Isaiah 53:12 applied to Jesus: "And He was numbered with the transgressors." Jesus tells them that it referred to Him and now would be fulfilled. Most Jews understood that Scripture as applying to the nation, not to Messiah. They did not have a concept of a suffering Servant Messiah. They thought that an exalted, powerful Messiah would deliver a suffering nation (Darrel Bock, *Luke* [Baker], 2:1748). As the risen Lord later tells the two men from Emmaus, and repeats to the apostles, the Christ first had to suffer these things and then enter into His glory (24:26, 46).

The application for us is that often behind our spiritual failure is our blindness to our own weakness and to the warnings of God's Word. We just don't see the situation from God's perspective. And, like the disciples, we often read Scripture with our own bias, missing what God intended for us to see. For example, I have seen Christians who read in Hebrews 11 of all the glorious deliverances that God accomplished through those who trusted Him, but they block out the end of the chapter, where it describes how believers were mocked, scourged, imprisoned, and sawed in two. So when they experience suffering rather than deliverance, they think that God has failed them. They simply did not understand Scripture.

Thus, behind spiritual failure is a spiritual enemy; and, there is blindness to our own weakness and danger.

- C. Behind spiritual failure is our own slowness to grasp the spiritual significance of events before they hit.

The disciples didn't realize that they were on the brink of the greatest spiritual conflict in history, when the Son of God would be delivered into the hands of sinners. If they had known what Jesus was telling them, that this hour and the power of darkness belonged to the enemy, they would have stayed awake and prayed with Jesus in the garden. Peter wouldn't have foolishly drawn his sword and lopped off the servant's ear. They were thinking in physical and human terms when they needed to be thinking in spiritual and supernatural terms.

When we fail the Lord, we usually are operating on the human plane only. We fail to see the cosmic battle in the heavenlies. We forget that we are supposed to glorify God before the principalities and powers. We're just thinking about our needs and our perspec-

tive. We forget that God has a bigger plan and that He wants to use this temptation as a victory for His cause. We miss the spiritual significance of events until it is too late.

D. Behind spiritual failure is a failure of faith.

The Lord tells Peter that He has prayed for him so that his faith may not fail. He means, so that it would not fail utterly, beyond recovery. His faith failed, but it did not fail completely because of the Lord's intercession. But when Satan attacks, he always attacks faith, because faith links us with Christ and all the benefits of our salvation. If the enemy can sever our faith, he has cut the connection by which we lay hold of God's grace and power. Without faith it is impossible to please God (Heb. 11:6). So the enemy invariably goes after the jugular vein of our faith.

That is why Paul tells us, in spiritual conflict, "in addition to all, taking up the shield of faith with which you will be able to extinguish all the flaming missiles of the evil one" (Eph. 6:16). That is why Peter later instructs us to resist the devil, firm in our faith (1 Pet. 5:9). If our faith is in the living Lord, we will not fail. Invariably, behind spiritual failure is a failure of our faith.

That's enough analysis of the problem. We fail because we do not reckon with this powerful spiritual enemy, the devil. We are often blind to our weakness and danger, so we ignore the Lord's warnings. We fail to grasp the spiritual significance of events that we face. And, we falter in our faith, which is our link with God's abundant resources. Now let's focus on the hope that the Lord gives us through His grace.

2. When we fail the Lord, His grace points the way back and gives us hope.

Just as a diamond sparkles more brilliantly when set on a background of black velvet, so God's grace shines more brilliantly when set against the blackness of our sin. His grace shines through in our text in several ways:

A. Christ's gracious prayers for us are the ultimate reason for our perseverance.

It's obvious that Peter didn't have a clue about what was going on concerning him in the spiritual realm. He didn't know that

Satan had demanded permission to sift him like wheat or that Christ had already prayed for him so that his faith would not finally fail. He erroneously thought that he could stand against this powerful enemy in his own resolve. But it's also obvious that the reason that Peter would recover and persevere in his service for the Lord was because of Christ's prayers for Peter, not because of Peter's resolve to follow the Lord.

In Romans 8:34, Paul proclaims, "Christ Jesus is He who died, yes, rather who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who also intercedes for us." Hebrews 7:25 tells us that since Christ abides forever as our great High Priest, "He is able to save forever [or, "completely"] those who draw near to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them." What a great assurance, that we are not only saved by Christ's death on our behalf, but that we also *shall be saved* by His present ministry of intercession for us! As Paul also assures us, "He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus" (Phil. 1:6). Even if you have failed the Lord big time, if you know that He saved you by His grace, then you can know that He will restore and keep you by that same grace. But if we have failed, we should not be passive:

B. Our repentance turns us away from sin and back to the Lord's grace.

The Lord tells Peter that he will "turn again" (22:32). Turning away from our sin and back to God is the main idea of repentance. In Acts 3:19, Peter preaches, "Repent therefore and return, that your sins may be wiped away, in order that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord." In Acts 26:18, Paul describes his commission from God to go to the Gentiles, "to open their eyes so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the dominion of Satan to God, in order that they may receive forgiveness of sins and an inheritance among those who have been sanctified by faith in Me."

Sometimes when we have sinned, we feel that we cannot go back to God again. But when Christ died on the cross for our sins, He didn't just die for the little ones. He died for them all, big and little alike! While we should never abuse God's grace by sinning, when we do sin, Scripture assures us that we have Christ as our advocate with the Father (1 John 2:1).

- C. The Lord's graciously restoring us to service keeps us walking in brokenness and trust.

I do not know why the Lord did not pray that Peter would be kept from sin. Rather, He prayed that having sinned, his faith would not permanently fail. But I do know that God often uses failure to teach us some lessons that we cannot learn in any other way. By nature, we are all too confident in our flesh, and it is only when we fall that we begin to realize how weak we really are, which drives us to trust more fully in the Lord's strength.

The Lord here assigns Peter a ministry after he is restored, to strengthen his brothers. He could do that ministry much more tenderly and without pride after his fall than he would have done before it. Before we fail we often look down on others who fail, proudly thinking that we are somehow more "together" than they are. God uses our failures make us more sympathetic and compassionate. As Paul instructs us when we seek to restore others, we must look to ourselves lest we too be tempted (Gal. 6:1). It is when we proudly think that we won't fall that we're most in danger of falling (1 Cor. 10:12).

- D. The fact that Christ graciously chose us even though He knew that we would fail should move us to repent.

The Lord chose Peter knowing full well how Peter would deny Him. Here Christ reveals in detail that before the cock crowed, Peter would deny three times that he knew Jesus. But, He still chose him! What was true of Peter is true of every believer: the Lord chose you knowing every sin that you would commit. His amazing grace should move us to repent and turn back to Him when we fail.

- E. The unusual grace that Christ shows after we repent should draw us to Him.

Jesus made a special point to single out Peter after the resurrection and to restore him to service. On that first Resurrection Sunday, when the men from Emmaus returned to Jerusalem to tell of their encounter with the risen Lord, the eleven said to them, "The Lord has really risen, and has appeared to Simon" (Luke 24:34). At the tomb, the angel told the surprised women, "He has

risen; He is not here; behold, here is the place where they laid Him. But go, tell His disciples and Peter, 'He is going before you into Galilee; there you will see Him, just as He said to you'" (Mark 16:6-7). Those wonderful extra and yet not extra words, "and Peter," show us the unusual grace of the Lord in restoring the repentant Peter. "Go and tell the disciples" was enough, since that included Peter. But knowing Peter's colossal failure, the Lord instructed the angel to add, "and Peter"! When we fail the Lord and then repent, He just keeps piling on His grace to reassure us of His forgiveness.

3. The starting point to experience God's grace is to trust in Christ as your sin bearer.

Jesus cites Isaiah 53:12 as finding fulfillment in Himself, that "He was numbered with transgressors." Of course this prophecy refers to His crucifixion between the two thieves, but it points to more. As John Calvin explains, "... Christ was subjected to the condemnation which we deserved, and *was reckoned among transgressors*, that we, who are *transgressors*, and loaded with crimes, might be presented by him to the Father as righteous. For we are reckoned pure and free from sins before God, because the Lamb, who was pure and free from every blemish, was placed in our room ..." (*Calvin's Commentaries* [Baker], "Harmony of the Gospels" 3:224). On the cross, Jesus Christ became our substitute, bearing the penalty we deserved. Isaiah 53:6 states, "All of us like sheep have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; but the Lord has caused the iniquity of us all to fall on Him."

But you must personally apply Christ's shed blood to your sins by faith. If you have not trusted in Christ, even if you think that you're a pretty good person, the Bible says that you are in Satan's domain of darkness (Col. 1:13). But God offers His free and abundant grace to every sinner. If you will trust in Jesus Christ to save you from God's judgment, you will experience His abundant grace and forgiveness for all your sins.

Conclusion

I believe that one of the main things that keeps us from receiving God's grace in Christ is our pride. We think, "Yes, I've failed God, but it wasn't all that bad. Besides, I'm basically a good person." The Bible says that God opposes the proud, but He gives

grace to the humble (1 Pet. 5:5). If you want God's grace, you must humble yourself and come as a needy sinner.

In the highlands of Scotland, sheep occasionally wander off among the rocky crags and get themselves trapped on dangerous ledges. They leap down to get the sweet grass on a ledge, but they can't get back up. A shepherd will allow the helpless animal to remain there for days, until it becomes so weak that it's unable to stand up. Finally, he ties a rope around himself and goes over the ledge to rescue the straying sheep.

You may ask, "Why doesn't the shepherd go down right away?" The answer is that the sheep are so foolish that they would dash right over the precipice and be killed if the shepherd didn't wait until their strength was nearly gone. ("Our Daily Bread," Winter, 1980.)

You may be like that straying sheep. You have allowed sin to entice you into a situation where you are trapped and unable to find your way out. Maybe you've even called out to God, but He doesn't seem to be answering. The reason is, He knows that you're still too strong in yourself. But when you come to the end of yourself and recognize that you cannot do anything to save yourself, if you will call out to Jesus Christ, He will save you. He is the Good Shepherd, who laid down His life for His sheep. Confess your sin and failure to Him. Cry out to Him to save you from your sins. You will experience His abundant grace.

Discussion Questions

1. Will a correct understanding of God's grace lead us to sin, knowing that we can be forgiven? Why/why not?
2. Discuss: Spiritual growth means growing to see our weakness, not growing stronger.
3. How can we hold on to faith in a time of trial or temptation? Why is this essential?
4. Where is the balance between God's keeping power and our responsibility to keep ourselves from sin?

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