

Failure

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SUMMARY

Personal reflections on how God can use failure in your life.

FAILURE

I have been a Christian for over thirty years. I estimate that in my Christian lifetime I have attended upward of a couple of thousand church services, hundreds of chapels at Wheaton College, and scores of Christian meetings at retreats, conferences, and so on, held by Campus Crusade and other groups. Yet during this entire time I have never once—not a single time in the thousands of meetings over some thirty-odd years—heard a speaker address the subject of failure. In fact, I probably would not myself have reflected seriously on the topic if it had not been for a crushing failure that drove me to face the problem personally.

The lack of treatment of this subject on the part of Christian speakers is not due to any lack of importance in the subject. Any Christian who has failed at some time knows how devastating the experience can be and the questions it raises: *Where is God? How could He let this happen? Am I outside His will? What do I do now? Does God really care or exist?* Those are agonizing questions. What is the meaning of failure for a Christian?

In addressing this problem, it seems to me that we need first to distinguish two types of failure: *failure in the Christian life* and *failure in the life of a Christian*. By failure in the Christian life, I mean a failure in a believer's relationship and walk with God. For example, a Christian might experience disappointment and failure due to a refusal to heed God's calling, or by succumbing to temptation, or through marrying a non-Christian. Failure of this type is due to sin. It is essentially a spiritual problem, a matter of moral and spiritual failure.

By contrast, failure in the life of a Christian is unrelated to spiritual considerations. It is not due to sin in the life of a believer. It is just some defeat a person who happens to be a Christian experiences in his day-to-day life. For example, a Christian businessman might go bankrupt, a Christian athlete might see his boyhood dreams shattered when he fails to make the major leagues, a Christian student might flunk out of school despite his best efforts to succeed, or a Christian workingman might find himself unemployed and unable to find a job. Such cases are not instances of failure in a person's walk with

God but instances of failure in the ordinary course of life. They just happen to occur in the lives of people who are Christians.

In his best-selling book *Failure: The Back Door to Success*, Erwin Lutzer deals with the distinction I am trying to make here. He attributes failure in the Christian life to lust of the flesh (sexual gratification), pride of life (egoism), or lust of the eyes (covetousness). Failure in the life of a Christian that is not related to those elements is just part of life. Lutzer finds no particular difficulty with the second type of failure, but he does find the first kind of failure problematic. He writes:

What causes failure? What makes a man come to the end of his life and admit he lived in vain? What motivates a man to commit suicide because he is not as gifted as others? ... What causes a man to jeopardize his Christian testimony and have an affair with his neighbor's wife? The answer: Sin—specifically, pride, covetousness, or sensual desire.

Of course, there are failures quite unrelated to sinful motivations: a student might fail in school, a man might make an unwise investment. Many people have failed at their jobs or simply fallen short of their goals. We shouldn't minimize this type of failure, but in the long run it is not as serious as spiritual failure. [1]

Lutzer devotes his entire book to failure in the Christian life, the first kind of failure, because he thinks that kind of failure has more serious consequences than the second type of failure. In one sense, that is true: one is morally guilty for failure due to sin. Failure in the Christian life breaks one's fellowship with God and has eternal consequences. We need to confess this type of failure to God, or we shall be held accountable and judged for it. So in the ultimate sense, the consequences of failure in the Christian life are far more serious than the ordinary failures that happen to occur in our lives.

On the other hand, however, in terms of everyday consequences in the world in which we live, it is not always true that the first type of failure has the more serious consequences. For if we do not know how to respond properly to it, failure in the life of a Christian can be even more devastating than failure that comes about specifically because of our sin.

Now I have no particular difficulty in understanding failure in the Christian life. Of course, sin leads to failure! What else could we expect? Nor is the solution to this sort of failure difficult to understand: repentance, confession, faith, and obedience. So I do not find failure in the Christian life puzzling, especially when I reflect on the weakness of my own flesh. It is not surprising that we sin and fail.

But the second type of failure is problematic to me. When someone is walking in faith and obedience to the Lord, how can he be led into the pit of failure? Think about it. How can obeying God's will lead to failure? This is, indeed, puzzling. Therefore, I want to focus our attention on this second kind of failure,

failure in the life of a Christian, and see if we can come to understand it.

For many years I had the point of view that Christians who are walking in God's will basically cannot fail. Perhaps I was just outrageously naive, but I don't think so. I had given the matter serious thought and had even qualified my position at several important points. For example, I distinguished failure from persecution. Scripture is clear that persons who are trying to live godly lives in Christ Jesus will experience persecution, and Jesus said that they will be blessed for it. Christians who have died in concentration camps because of their faith, or who have lost jobs or been discriminated against because they were Christians, could not properly be said to have failed.

I also distinguished failure from trials. The Scripture is clear that as Christians we are not exempt from trials and that such testing produces maturity and endurance. Without trials we would remain pampered and spoiled children. But I believed that if we endured our trials in reliance upon God's strength, He would see us through and bring us victoriously to the other side. Basically, it just did not make sense to me to say that God would call a person to do something and then—when that person was obedient to the call and was relying on God's strength—allow him to fail.

And, in fact, there is some Scriptural support for the position I took. Look at what Psalm 1:1-3 says:

Blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked
or stand in the way of sinners
or sit in the seat of mockers.
But his delight is in the law of the Lord,
and on his law he meditates day and night.
He is like a tree planted by streams of water,
which yields its fruit in season
and whose leaf does not wither.
Whatsoever he does prospers.

What could be clearer? In all that he does, he prospers! But then I experienced a disastrous personal failure that forced me to rethink this entire issue. It occurred while Jan and I were living in West Germany and I was finishing my doctoral studies in theology at the University of Munich under the famous theologian Wolfhart Pannenberg. My dissertation had already been approved, and all that remained was to pass the oral examination in theology (ominously called the *Rigorosum*). Not knowing what to expect, I tried repeatedly to get an appointment with Pannenberg to discuss the examination and how I might prepare for it. But I was never able to succeed in seeing him (German professors tend to be much more reclusive than their American counterparts). So I went to his teaching assistant, a brilliant young theologian who had earned his doctorate under Pannenberg. He brushed aside the idea

of preparing for the examination. "Forget it!" he advised. Well, I wasn't that stupid, so I pressed him further on how I might prepare. "Pannenberg always asks questions only over his own writings," he responded. "Just read what he has written."

That seemed to me to be a good strategy, and so over the next several weeks I read and studied virtually everything Pannenberg had ever written. I felt confident that I had mastered his thought.

On the day of the examination I entered Pannenberg's office. He would deliver the exam himself, and the process was to be monitored and recorded by the dean of the theology faculty and one other professor of theology. We shook hands all around and sat down for the questioning to commence.

Almost immediately things began to go wrong. Pannenberg began to ask questions on subjects that were not discussed in his writings. He began to ask about the particularities of this or that man's theology. *And I could not answer the questions.* Again and again I had to confess my ignorance. I cannot convey to you the feeling of helplessness and fear that swept over me. Question after question, I realized that I was watching my doctorate slip away before me, and—like trying to grasp sand slipping through your fingers—there was nothing I could do to stop it. This torture went on for nearly an hour. Near the end of the hour's examination, just to make my failure patently evident to all, Pannenberg asked a couple of condescendingly easy questions, as if to come down to my level of knowledge. My humiliation was complete.

Devastated, I left the theology department to meet Jan to go out to dinner at a restaurant where the two of us had planned to celebrate. She came rushing up to me, smiling, with a look of expectancy in her eyes. "Honey—I failed," I said. She couldn't believe it. It was just before Christmas, and on the twenty-third we had planned to fly back to the United States to visit my family and begin teaching at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School in Deerfield, Illinois, after the New Year. Now we were going home in defeat. As if to add injury to insult, on the flight back, Lufthansa lost our IBM typewriter, Jan's handbag where she had packed her most valuable personal effects was stolen, and I lost both my contact lenses!

But those material losses were nothing compared to the turmoil I felt inside over losing my doctorate. I just couldn't understand how God could have let it happen. He had called us to Germany and miraculously supplied the finances for my study. We were walking in His will; I was sure of it. I had not been negligent or overconfident. I had tried often to see Pannenberg in advance, but he was always too busy for me, so I prepared the best way I knew how. But especially, we had prayed earnestly and faithfully for this examination, and there were others, Spirit-filled Christians in the United States, praying for it, too. The examination had been entirely fair, I couldn't deny that. I had just failed it, that's all. But how could God have let it happen? What about His promises? "In all that he does, he prospers."

“Whatever you ask in my name...”

It wasn't just that I had failed an examination. More than that, my failure was a spiritual crisis in faith for me. I felt hurt and disgraced, but even more, I felt betrayed by God. How could I ever trust Him again?

As I worked through my feelings in the ensuing days, it became clear to me that Psalm 1:1-3 just could not be construed as some sort of blanket promise that covers every case. Christians don't always prosper in what they undertake. Sometimes they do fail, and that's just a fact.

Now someone might say, “You can't use human experience to nullify God's Word! His promises stand regardless of your experience.” But the problem with this response is that Scripture itself gives examples of such failure. For instance, God had promised to give the land of Canaan to the twelve tribes of Israel. But in Judges 1:19, we read, “The Lord was with the men of Judah. They took possession of the hill country, but they were unable to drive the people from the plains, because they had iron chariots.” Look at what it says here: *the Lord was with the armies of Judah*—but despite that fact, although they conquered the hill country, they failed to defeat their enemy in the plains because they had iron chariots! It doesn't seem to make sense: God was with them, and yet they failed. How are we to understand such failure in the life of the believer?

Now some people might answer that question by claiming that God has no specific will for our lives. God's will is His general desire that we obey His ethical and spiritual commands, that we arrive at a Christlike character, and so forth. But He has no specific will for individual persons that includes such matters as getting a doctorate, marrying a certain person, or entering into a particular business deal. So when we undertake those things, we do so wholly on our own initiative and may well wind up in failure.

But this solution strikes me as inadequate, despite its apparent appeal to many people. In the first place, it implies a deficient concept of God's sovereignty, providence, and guidance. Although the Bible teaches human freedom, it also has a strong emphasis on God's sovereign control and providential direction over everything that happens. Nothing happens in the world without God's either directly willing it, or, in the case of sinful acts, at least permitting it. Moreover, God has so providentially ordered the world that His ends will be accomplished by the things we decide to undertake. Our decisions, then, cannot be a matter of indifference to Him. Moreover, He has promised to guide us in what we decide. All this suggests that God does have a specific will for our lives.

But that point aside, in the second place, this proposed solution doesn't actually get to the heart of the problem. For even if God does not have a specific will for our lives, the fact remains that He has promised to be with us, empowering and helping us. That is why the example in Judges is so puzzling. The Lord was with them, but still they failed. So even if God has no specific will for our lives, that still doesn't explain how we can fail in things we decide to do in His strength.

And so I was led to what was, for me, a radical new insight into the will of God, namely, that God's *will for our lives can include failure*. In other words, God's will may be that you fail, and He may lead you into failure! For there are things that God has to teach you through failure that He could never teach you through success.

In my own case, failing my doctoral exams forced me to see my life's priorities in a new light. When we returned to my folks for Christmas, I broke the news to my parents that I had failed my oral examination and didn't receive the doctorate. To my astonishment, my mother retorted, "Who cares?" I was stunned! To me it seemed like the catastrophe of a lifetime, but she just shrugged it off as though it didn't matter. It dawned on me that in one sense it really didn't, that there are things in life a good deal more important than doctorates, publications, and academic fame. In the end, it was human relationships that really mattered—especially family relationships.

My mind went back to a scientist we had met in Germany who had been divorced for many years and who wanted with all his heart to return to his wife and little boy. "When I was first married," he had told us, "I spent all my time in the laboratory. All I could think of was my research to the exclusion of anything or anyone else." It had seemed so important to him then. But now he knew it wasn't. "I was a fool," he said. And so I, too, now realized afresh the blessings I had in a faithful wife who had sacrificed and worked with me all those years I was in school and in loving parents who accepted me unconditionally just because I was their son. That Christmas marked the beginning of a new relationship with my folks. Jan and I came to know them not merely as parents but as friends.

You see, I had failed to understand what true success really is. True success is not achieving wealth, power, or fame. True success lies in the realm of the spiritual, or to be more specific, lies in getting to know God better. J. I. Packer expresses this thought succinctly in *Knowing God*:

We have been brought to the point where we both can and must get our life's priorities straight. From current Christian publications you might think that the most vital issue for any real or would-be Christian in the world today is church union, or social witness, or dialogue with other Christians and other faiths, or refuting this or that -ism, or developing a Christian philosophy and culture, or what have you. But our line of study makes the present-day concentration on these things look like a gigantic conspiracy of misdirection. Of course, it is not that; the issues themselves are real and must be dealt with in their place. But it is tragic that, in paying attention to them, so many in our day seem to have been distracted from what was, is, and always will be the true priority for every human being—that is, learning to know God in Christ. [2]

When I first read this statement, it took me aback: "refuting this or that -ism or developing a Christian philosophy." Exactly the sort of thing I am about in life! And yet it is not the most important. One could

succeed in it and yet, in God's sight, still be a failure.

That brings to mind a thought that Lutzer says came to haunt him as a busy pastor: "You may not be accomplishing as much as you think you are." We can be doing many things for the Lord and still fail to be the kind of person God desires us to be. Indeed, my greatest fear is that I should some day stand before the Lord and see all my works go up in smoke like so much "wood, hay, and stubble." What, after all, did Jesus say?—"The first shall be last, and the last shall be first." It is not success in the eyes of the world that ultimately counts, but success in the Lord's eyes.

Now this is both encouraging and convicting. On the one hand, it is encouraging because even though we fail, failure may be the better part of success in the Lord's eyes. I have a hunch that God is not so much interested in what we go through as in how we go through it. Though we may fail in the task that we've set out to do, if we respond to that failure with faith, courage, and dependency on the Lord's strength, rather than with despair, bitterness, and depression, we are counted a success in His sight.

On the other hand, it is convicting because we may think that we are accomplishing a lot when actually we are failing in the Lord's sight. The apostle Paul recognized that he could be a brilliant and gifted theologian, one who lived in poverty because of his generosity and who was even martyred for preaching the gospel, and yet, if he lacked love, be nothing in God's sight. For true success is found in loving God and our fellow man.

Well, what practical application does all this have for our lives? Two points can be made.

First, we need to learn from our failures. When we fail, we shouldn't adopt the sour grapes attitude of the fox in Aesop's fable. Instead, we should analyze our failure to see what lesson we can learn from it. That does not mean trying to figure out why God allowed it to happen. In many cases, we'll never know why. Too many Christians fall into what Packer calls the "York signal box mistake." [3] In the train yards in the city of York is a master control room containing an electronic panel showing in lights the position of every train in the yard. Someone in the control tower, who sees the whole panel, can understand just why a particular train was put on hold at one spot or why another was shunted into a siding somewhere else, even though to someone down on the tracks the movements of the trains may appear to be inexplicable. The Christian who wants to know why God permits every failure in his life is asking, Packer says, to be in God's "signal box," and yet, for better or for worse, we just don't have access to it. Therefore, it is pointless to torture ourselves about why God permitted this or that disaster to come into our lives.

But although we don't always discern or comprehend God's providential design, we can still learn from our failures. As Lutzer says, "It isn't necessary to know why God sent us the misfortune in order to profit from it." [4] Ask yourself what you should have done differently in your situation or what you could do

differently next time. Ask yourself what sort of reaction God wants you to have, or what character trait can be developed in you as a result of the defeat. Learn from your failure.

Second, never give up. Just because you have failed, it's not all over for you. Here the example of a man like President Theodore Roosevelt is instructive. Weak and sickly as a boy, Roosevelt battled mightily to achieve great things, the only President ever to be awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor for his valor on the battlefield. Roosevelt declared,

The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood; who strives valiantly; who errs, who comes short again and again, because there is no effort without error and shortcoming; but who does actually strive to do the deeds; who knows great enthusiasms, the great devotions; who spends himself in a worthy cause; who at the best knows in the end the triumph of high achievement, and who at the worst, if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly, so that his place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who neither know victory nor defeat.

You're not finished just because you fail. You're only finished if you give up and quit. But don't quit! With God's strength, pick up the pieces of your failure and, having learned from it, go on.

That's what we did in our case. At German universities, if you fail the oral examinations the first time, you can retake them. Jan and I both knew that I had to try again, and our friends encouraged us to do so. So after beginning to teach at Trinity, I spent the next entire year preparing again for the *Rigorosum*. I worked through Harnack's prodigious, three-volume *Dogmengeschichte*, Pelikan's multi-volume *History of the Development of Doctrine*, Cunliffe-Jones's *History of Christian Doctrine*, Loof's *Dogmengeschichte*, two lengthy study guides on the whole of Dogmatics prepared for German university students in theology, as well as studying the documents of the various councils and creeds of the church, readings in the church Fathers, works on contemporary theology, and so forth. By the time the year was out, I had a stack of notes about a foot high, which I had virtually memorized, and was prepared to answer questions on any area of systematic theology—be it Christology, anthropology, soteriology, or whatever—from the early Apologists to the Middle Ages, through the Reformation, the Enlightenment, and the twentieth century. I was set. But I was scared to death.

We returned to Germany that next summer, and I left Jan in Berlin while I traveled by train to Munich for the exam. When I walked into Pannenberg's office, everything looked pretty much the same as before. But this time, it was different. Pannenberg began with the doctrine of the Trinity, starting with the logos doctrine of the early Apologists. And to my joy (which I could scarcely conceal!), as the examination continued to unfold, I found myself readily responding to each question with full and accurate answers. The only question I tripped up on was one about why Hegel's doctrine of the incarnation entailed the death of God—and I didn't feel so bad about missing that one! Pannenberg himself was clearly

delighted with my success and awarded me a *magna cum laude* for the examination. I was dancing on air!

So it was a victory for the Lord in the end. But the victory was not just in passing the examination. For, not to mention the spiritual lessons God taught me, I discovered a sobering truth. Like so many other American students, I had been woefully trained in seminary in the history of Christian doctrine. The training in systematic theology that American evangelical seminaries generally give their students is but a pale shadow of what German university students in theology receive. Is it therefore any wonder that sceptical German theology leads the world? How can we ever hope that evangelical theology will become a leading model unless we begin to train our students with the same rigor and thoroughness that characterize German theological instruction? I can say without hesitation that during that year of intense study I learned more about systematic theology than I did during my entire seminary training. So although I would never want to relive my experience, I can honestly say that I'm glad I failed. It was for the best, because as a result of that failure I became theologically equipped for the Lord's service in a way that would never have been possible if I had passed.

And I'm so glad that we didn't quit. Suppose we had just given up. Let's say that in the humiliation of my failure, I had lost hope and not tried to take the exam the second time. The pangs of defeat would have haunted me every time I thought of my failure or opened a book on systematic theology. I would not have had that year of intensive study, and I would have remained in my anemic state of theological knowledge. The years would have passed, and I would have continually asked myself the question: *Should I have tried again?* Even if I had tried and failed the second time, I would still have been better off than by quitting. To paraphrase an old motto in a different context: It is better to have tried and failed than not to have tried at all.

So when you encounter failure, don't give up. Ask God for the strength to go on. He will give it to you. In fact, there is a biblical name for that quality. It is called *endurance*. Through failure, if you respond correctly, God can build the quality of endurance into your life.

Failure in the life of a Christian, then, should not surprise us. God has important things to teach us through failure—and true success, the success that counts for eternity, consists in learning those lessons. So when you fail, do not despair or think that God has abandoned you; rather, learn from your failures and never give up. That is the formula for success.

Footnotes

[1] Erwin Lutzer, *Failure: The Back Door to Success* (Chicago: Moody, 1975), pp. 41-42.

[2] J. I. Packer, *Knowing God* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1973), p. 314.

[3] Ibid., pp. 110-11.

[4] Lutzer, *Failure*, p. 66.