

Failure

The Old Testament is saturated with failure. The idyllic arrangement in the Garden resulted in failure, and that first couple had to be thrown out of the Garden, from the place of blessing, from being in God's presence. Those first generations then failed miserably, so much so that God had to send a world-wide flood in judgment. The Book of Genesis then ended with the chosen family becoming so much like the depraved Canaanites that God had to get that family out of the promised land; so to Egypt. Then after miraculously being delivered from Egypt, there was abysmal failure: At the base of Mount Sinai (the golden calf episode), and then again at Kadesh-Barnea – the refusal to go with God back into the promised land. Then after the Conquest, at the end of the period of the Judges, there again was failure, ghastly failure. The Israelites in those final chapters of the Judges were just as degraded as were the Sodomites in Genesis 19 (Judges 19 reprises that sordid Genesis chapter). The Israelites were destroying themselves instead of the wicked Canaanites. The text says the problem was that there was no king.

OK, so the next block of content in the OT is the story of the Monarchy. And that too ended in miserable failure. The idolatry, disobedience, rebellion, and sin was so bad God had them thrown out of the Land. First the Northern Kingdom went into Exile. Then the Southern Kingdom. In time, a tiny remnant returned to the Land, but they too failed, and their failure was even worse than could be imagined. The story resumes in the Gospel narratives of the New Testament. When that Jewish remnant's own promised Messiah-King came to them, they not only didn't recognize Him, they rejected Him and had Him put to death. They wanted nothing to do with their God. So they got thrown out of the land once again, in 70 AD by the Roman armies.

Jesus, Israel's Messiah-King, came as the true Israel. He's the personal embodiment of Israel. His life at the 1st Advent recapitulated the story of Israel. Thus His suffering and death on the cross appeared to be failure of His mission, just as Israel all thru the O.T. had failed. His weakness, submitting to the fierce hatred of Israel's and Rome's rulers and his resulting sufferings repeated the sad story of the O.T. The disciples were not just disappointed at the crucifixion of Jesus, they were grief-stricken (Mark 16:10) at what appeared to be the failure of the One they identified (correctly) as the promised Messiah-King. But the resurrection changed everything! It not only vindicated His Person, His work, and His mission, it meant that He had not failed. He triumphed! It establishes the expectation that in the future the nation of Israel also will experience a "resurrection" and will serve God successfully and triumphantly. It meant that God had great and lofty purposes for His creation that necessitated the "failure" of Christ at Golgotha.

Why does the Bible have a long litany of failure? Because there's theology here (sadly, a doctrine not recognized by the Church), a theology of failure. Moses identified it (Deut 29:4): humanity, unaided by God Himself, can't withstand the power of sin or the onslaught of Satan and his world system. Satan had lied when he said, "your eyes will be opened and you will be like God" (Gen 3:5). Evil is overpowering. And failure was inevitable. But Jeremiah 31 and Ezekiel 36 promised a time would come when God will deal with this issue. The resurrection of Christ and the resultant gift of the Holy Spirit make it possible to overcome failure. Believers during the Church Age identify with Jesus, the despised and rejected One, the man of sorrows and acquainted with grief. We embrace weakness and suffering, just as Jesus did, trusting in God to vindicate us one future day. Yet we also are empowered by the indwelling Spirit to accomplish great things for God (John 14:12 and 15:8, 16).

Why discuss failure here? Because it's possible that the Church Age will also end in failure. Every prior dispensation did, so we can reasonably assume the Church will likewise fail. In 1 Timothy 4 and especially 2 Timothy 3, Paul seems to anticipate failure. "But mark this: There will be terrible times in the last days . . ." He then supplies a list of vices, and concludes with, ". . . having a form of godliness but denying its power." He must be describing conditions *in the Church!* Paul is, after all, writing to the Church. And his concluding remark about godliness would indicate he must be describing the Church at the end of the church age. What is the "form of godliness without its power" that Paul refers to here? It could be either the power of the indwelling Spirit is absent, or that the transformation that must occur in a believer's life is absent. Or both. The Holy Spirit is humble. He won't force Himself on us. We can yield to the Spirit, or we can quench or grieve the Spirit. We don't *have* to obey the Word of Christ if we don't want to. So failure results.

The Letters that are in Revelation Chapters 2 and 3 are written to the local churches. And in these letters, Christ repeatedly says, "to him who overcomes . . ." Jesus does not want anyone in the churches to fail. But if the blessings of salvation are for those who overcome, that must mean that there will be those who *don't* overcome. Who are they?

One possibility is, the churches are not comprised entirely of believers. Not everyone who professes to be a Christian really is one. These professing Christians were exposed to the Gospel, but for whatever reason, sadly, they failed to respond as they should have. Thus Christ levels serious criticisms at His churches. Alternatively, they could be believers who will miss out on the blessings of salvation, but other Scripture makes this highly unlikely. Even more unlikely is the interpretation that every believer is an overcomer. The meaning is difficult to grasp. But whoever they are, there will be those in the churches who fail. It means we'd better do all in our power to be sure we're an overcomer.

Don't play games with Christ. Jesus said (Mark 13), "Be on guard! Be alert . . . keep watch because you do not know when the owner of the house will come back . . . do not let him find you sleeping . . . Watch!" And in Jesus' parable of the ten virgins (Matthew 25) are the compelling and tragic words, "And the door was shut." And those who weren't prepared heard, "I don't know you." We've been given the Word and the Spirit so there's no excuse for anyone to be not fully prepared to be in the presence of Christ. There will be those who are unprepared, who constitute the failed ones. May you not be included among them!

There's one attribute of God that theologians haven't recognized: His purposefulness. Everything God does is filled with purpose. Everything that exists in His creation and everything that happens has purpose. We've been called to participate in God's purposes, to join Him in carrying out His great, cosmic purposes. And He's revealed them to us. They are there in His Word. And we've identified them in our Sunday School lessons. We just don't want to know what they are, or do them. That's why failure results.

Jesus made it clear what His expectations of us are: "Whoever would come after Me must deny himself and take up his cross, and follow Me." This is the responsibility of everyone who claims to be a Christian. To deny oneself means deliberately to empty our minds, our hearts, our lives of everything that's self, and replace it, all of it, with God's values, God's thoughts, God's loves, God's purposes. To take up a cross means to live in such a way that nothing else matters, *nothing*, except that we're about to be in God's presence, so we must please Him as we know from His Word He wants to be pleased. A man carrying a cross is about to be crucified; he's going to his death. He's not interested in sports, or fine food, or political issues, or who has offended him in the past, or his career, or any of countless other issues. He's thinking of one thing only: "God is about to confront me, and He's a dangerous God who has commanded me how to live." To follow Christ is to be and to do, in other words to live, exactly as Jesus. Our lives, our very being, should mimic His; we should be like a clone of Jesus. To be a "Christian" is to be a miniature Christ, carrying out His mission. Otherwise, we can look forward to failure.

But someone will argue, "Hey, this isn't grace! You're spouting legalism. God has forgiven us all our sins and promised us heaven, and it's all based on what Christ has done, not on what I do or don't do. Christianity is just believing in Christ while I live my life." Oh? Then why did God give us the New Testament, 90% of which tells us how believers are to live?

We've turned Christianity into something that's not biblical. But we've kept the "Christianity" name, so nobody realizes what's happened. We have covered our fiercely selfish lives with a thin veneer of religion, of church attendance, of sitting passively during a homily and singing a hymn or two, and we suppose that we're now Christians. All we need to do to please God, we suppose, is identify as a Christian, one who attends church. This is playing games with God.

No one is saved without repentance. Repentance is changing one's mind about who Jesus is. Yes! It's changing one's mind about how to gain eternal life. Yes! But repentance is vastly more than that. Repentance is a life-long change, involving our sanctification according to the Word of God enabled by the indwelling Spirit, and yet it's more. Repentance is also our taking responsibility for having offended God with our sins. We don't realize how damaging our sins are to a holy God. We talk about sin and think about sin in the abstract. We recite the doctrine that sin is the reason for Christ's death on the cross. But we don't know in our lives or feel in our hearts how hideous sin really is. And how terrible the consequences are for sin – an eternity of horrible punishment in hell. If we had any sense of the weight of sin and what Jesus has rescued us from, our lives would have to be different.

God has in mind very great matters. The hideousness of sin and His beloved creatures being in hell for an eternity occupies His mind. He has already, in the Person of the Son, done all that's necessary to deal with this monstrous evil. In His wisdom, He has assigned to His creatures, to the very ones responsible for having offended Him, the task of participating with Him in reversing this grotesque situation of sin and evil. That's why repentance is needed, and that's why we're to undertake a loving God's mission of getting others saved and also involved in the task. Salvation brings with it responsibilities, responsibilities that are of the greatest importance to God. Failure should be no option.

God did not grant the fallen angels the privilege of repentance; they receive nothing but judgment, terrible condemnation. But to us who rebelled against Him, God has given the great privilege of repenting of our selfishness and sins and joining Him in His great work of rescue, of bringing His beloved fallen human creatures into personal relationship with Himself. He has granted us the privilege of taking responsibility for our sins and escaping judgment.

God is infinitely glorious. We were created to reflect His glory, as a mirror reflects the image of someone. That's how we are the "image" of God. Our fall into sin grotesquely marred and distorted that image. When the Son was here on earth, He not only revealed God perfectly but, having taken human form, He did it in a way that we can emulate. That's why if we're Christ-like, meaning we are in our person as Christ was and we do with our life as Christ did, we reflect God's glory. If we're the image of Christ, we're the image of God. And we glorify God.

During the several eras recorded in the OT Scriptures, in various ways God gave His human creatures instructions and commands by which they would fulfill His great creational purposes. Refusal to obey, inability to grasp the reason for their calling, and preoccupation with self and with the world around them resulted in . . . failure. We in this Church Age have far more revelation, a far greater salvation, and the precious gift of the Spirit of Christ to enable us to obey, to understand God's purpose for us, and to deny self and eschew worldliness. So there's no excuse for failure. Yet the church's failure seems to be anticipated in the Word. What else is American Christianity's blatant refusal to share Christ with others but failure! May those who fail not include you.

We're right now in a time and place in history that's loaded with bamboozle. Lies and deceptions surround us, and that includes the phony religion of church-attendance-Christianity. Don't let this really big one fool you.

The year 2020 was a hinge in history. It was a transition, so that now more than ever the end of the Church Age is imminent. And when it ends, there will be only bitter remorse for those who failed. Nothing comes to mind that's more tragic than to have known what one's responsibilities and privileges were, to have refused them, and then to suffer unrelenting consequences as a result. Yes, God is love. And yes, God forgives. But the Gospel is so powerful and of such cosmic importance, because it involves the humiliation, suffering and death of God Himself and rescue from an eternity in hell, that it necessitates a radical transformation of the life of the one who believes it. No transformation? Failure.

Christ wants us all to be an overcomer, not a failure. An overcomer is a person who, aware of the spiritual realities revealed in the Word, deliberately says "no" to self and its desires, says "no" to all that stems from the sin nature, and says "no" to all that comes from the world (or from Satan). Instead, in a faith commitment, an overcomer says "yes" to being like Christ. To be just like Christ means being a person who selflessly, generously and sacrificially gives of himself to others, to help them, to bless them, show love to them. It means in humility serving God according to His will, despite what risks, dangers or consequences may be involved. It means trusting God to vindicate and reward him for whatever sacrifice serving Him entails. It means being a person who knows God and loves God so much that nothing in this life can interfere with the relationship. It is being a person whose mind—indeed, whose life—is shaped by the Word of God.

"Wait," I hear also from some readers, "you're making this up. I don't hear any of this from the pulpit." But pulpits are *not* silent about this. We simply don't want to do what we hear, so we stop hearing it. Every church preaches the two greatest commandments, "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, soul and might. And thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself." What we're discussing in this lesson is just exposition of those two commandments. Don't blame the preacher for your intransigence. Besides, all that's being discussed here is in the Bible. The problem is, we read the Word without intention of doing the Word, so the Word doesn't get translated into our life. That's why when we read what's here in this lesson, it sounds foreign. It's not foreign. It's biblical Christianity.

Christians in America stand on dangerous ground. For decades they have been exposed to quality preaching and teaching of the Bible, so they know what God expects of them. A spiritual principle applies here: To whom much is given, much is required. Much privilege equates to great responsibility. American Christians have been basking in the light of the Word, but with scant obedience. To refuse to do God's will is thus a deliberate choice; so failure is what they've chosen.

Jesus was an overcomer (Rev 3:21). Paul was working at it, but (in Philippians 3:12) he admitted that he did not have it perfect. We won't be perfect until the day we're taken up to heaven, our sin nature will be removed, and we'll be glorified. But for now . . . Hey! *Are we even trying?* Don't be indifferent to Christ's will for us. It's to be an overcomer.