

The Defeat of Failure

Failure is built into the cosmos. It's the story of the Bible. It's the story of humanity. It's the story of our lives. Failure is writ big . . . *everywhere*.

Every narrative in the Bible ends in failure. The Garden story is one of tragic failure. The ante-diluvian era ended in failure. Genesis ended in failure. The Exodus generation failed. Moses failed. The conquest was a failure, evidenced by the hideous failures in the era of the Judges. Samson's life –all his supernatural powers and promise notwithstanding – was one prolonged failure and ended in worse failure. David failed. Solomon failed. The era of the Monarchy was a total, pathetic failure. Job came within an inch of failing, and if it weren't for God's irruption at the end, that story would have ended in failure too. The entire Old Testament is a story of repeated, ugly failure.

The New Testament is no different. After 3 glorious years in the presence of Jesus, the Apostles failed. Peter, seemingly the strongest of them, failed miserably, embarrassingly. Paul's great fear was that he might fail. Paul's co-workers failed him. Pastors will fail us. Entire ministries can fail. The church age will end in failure. Failures of the churches is painfully there for all to see in Revelation chapters 2 and 3. Even self-love is failure.

Bridges fail. Tires fail. Dams fail. Crops fail. Buildings collapse. Entire systems, regardless how well engineered, fail. It's the reason for Murphy's Law in engineering ("If anything can go wrong, it will.") Friends fail us. Marriages end in failure. Other relationships fail. Society fails. Economies fail. Armies fail. Governments fail. (And the bigger those governments are, the bigger they fail.)

Our Christian lives even are characterized by failure. We fail to yield to the Spirit. We indulge our sin nature. We presume upon God, we even put Him to the test. We fail to know the Word as we ought. We fail to obey it even if we know it. We don't know God as we should, and we don't love others as we should. And not just from time to time, but continually. Regardless how good our intentions may be, we fail God. Even our bodies age and fail. Death is the ultimate experience of failure. Life itself fails.

Failure is the one characteristic of all existence. It's the one over-riding characteristic of this world we live in. Which is strange. Here's why . . .

God exists eternally as three Persons of one substance and with one will. The Persons have the same attributes and are infinitely good, glorious and perfect. The Persons of the Godhead are bonded together in infinitely great love, peace and joy. One would think, and it's probably true, that God would want His creation to reflect His glory. So creation should be filled with love, peace and joy. But it's not. At least, not what we now know of it.

We can reasonably surmise that, prior to beginning to create, God considered what kind of world would be best to meet His purposes. And in His infinite wisdom and exhaustive knowledge of all things, He chose this world we live in. It's the best of all conceivable worlds for God to fulfill His great purposes. He chose a world of failure. He chose a world in which evil and His necessary judgments would necessarily prevail. He chose a world that would be filled with natural calamities, and violence, hatred and lies and rebellions. He chose a world that would have lovely animals that would be killed by predators. A world filled with tragedy, injustice, hopelessness, and suffering. A world full of indifference to Him, if not outright hatred. He chose a world that would give Him infinite sorrow. It's inconceivable that a good God is in any sense pleased with the horror of all this. Yet . . . His ultimate purposes are worth it.

So. Why failure? Sin, and God's judgment upon sin is the easy answer. And it's not a wrong answer, but it's not a complete answer. We have to think deeper. There has to be much more to it. Satan and a host of supernatural wicked beings? Absolutely. But that's still not adequate. To answer this, we need to reflect on some Scripture.

"God is love" (1 John 4:8,16). Of course God is holy, just, wise, all-powerful, sovereign, and more. Yet Scripture highlights that God is love for a reason. It's God's love that matters to us. It's God's love that moved Him to create what He did and to use what He created to fulfill His great purposes. It's God's love that will turn failure into that which reflects His glory. It's God's love that is the greatest and the most compellingly winsome attribute of His Person. It's God's love that differentiates good from evil. It's because God is love that God is good. So God loves the unlovely, the people who fail, those who deserve only to be alienated and, worse, condemned. This unique and infinitely perfect love is expressed to those who are ugly, to those who offend a holy God with their sins, even to those who hate Him. **"Where sin abounded, grace did more abound"** (Romans 5:20). Grace is God's love flowing out to unlovely failures and sinners.

“Love never fails” (1 Corinthians 13:8). It’s God’s love that Paul refers to in this verse, not any kind of expression of human love, or sentimental love. It’s God’s love that will vanquish sin and failure. It’s God’s love that will defeat evil. It’s God’s love expressed in us that overcomes failure and defeats evil. The essence of godliness, of spiritual maturity, of righteousness, is the expression of God’s love. The two greatest commandments, “Thou shalt love the Lord thy God,” and “Thou shalt love thy neighbor,” are for us to love as God loves.

“Love covers a multitude of sins” (1 Peter 4:8). God’s love overcomes failure. When we express God’s love, failure becomes impotent and meaningless. We defeat failure by expressing God’s love. And when we love as God loves, we take the side of God in the defeat of evil. Love has many expressions, such as mercy, generosity, forgiveness, grace, long-suffering, gentleness, kindness, etc. The key expressions of love that are necessary in the context of failure are forgiveness, mercy and grace. Showing forgiveness and grace, God overcomes and transforms a world of failure. Peter astutely, incisively gets to the core of meaning in life, indeed, the meaning of all existence: expressing love.

“For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son . . . ” (John 3:16). We are so familiar with this verse we no longer think deeply about it. First, how does God love? By doing! Love is no mere emotion, it’s not just a warm feeling. Love is action. Love must result in sacrificially doing something for others that enriches them, that benefits them, that helps them in some way. Or it’s not love. God loves His failed human creatures. Second, what does it mean that God “gave”? It must mean that He sent the Son to earth to be humiliated and to experience failure and pain and death. And then to rise above it all in glorious victory. God’s love for us is purposeful; it is meant to defeat failure and by that defeat to vanquish sin and evil, to honor the Son, and to glorify Himself. The self-sacrificing gift of the Son is God’s supreme expression of love.

“We love Him because He first loved us” (1 John 4:19). Our response to God’s initiative is love. The Scriptures repeatedly use the terms “faith” or “trust” or “believe,” but these are really human expressions of love. By the way, “love” here is not simply a warm feeling. It’s the same kind of love that pervades Scripture: doing. Love is as love does. We love God by honoring Him with our lives. We love God by obeying His Word. We love God by selflessly serving Him as He commanded. We love God by repenting of sin and failure and becoming holy, as He is holy. We love God by showing selfless love to others. Or it’s not love. And if there’s no love, there’s only failure.

We in America cherish peace, security, and comforts. We want to be healthy, wealthy and wise. But none of these bring happiness, nor do they indicate success in life. These goods that we value so highly actually prevent us from understanding the reason for our very existence. Instead of bringing happiness, almost inexorably, they lead to failure. It’s built into the cosmos. So sooner or later, our bubbled existence bursts and to our horror the brute reality of life on earth grasps us like the coils of a python. There’s only one escape from the despair and hopelessness of sin and failure, and that’s loving God and loving our neighbor – *regardless* of circumstances.

The Book of Job is highly instructive if we understand Job to represent all humanity. The lesson is this, It doesn’t matter what our particular situation in life may be, what our circumstances may be, what losses or pain we may suffer, or how lowly we find ourselves; what does matter is that God exists and He is love. He’s a good God and He’s made precious promises in His Word that demand from us a response of love for Him. And out of the relationship that flows from that, we are delivered from sin and failure and hopelessness to a life of glory. And God is glorified in the process. This world that God made is as it is, saturated with sin and failure, so that God’s glory may be manifest. He is lovely in the extreme.

“My Father . . . is the One who glorifies [or honors] Me” (John 8:54b). The Pharisees and Sadducees were obsessed with seeking honor for themselves (as we are today), and doing so they dishonored the Son. As a result, God dishonored them, leaving them with nothing but failure. Jesus accepted the humiliation of incarnation and rejection by His own people, the shame of the cross, even undeserved death. He did it to honor the Father. And the Father likewise honors the Son. The purpose of the humiliation and exaltation of Christ, the purpose of all that Christ did to obtain redemption, is glory, glory to the Father and to the Son. And now there’s this, **“My Father will honor the one who serves Me”** (John 12:26c). In love, the Son was serving the Father. Loving Christ means serving Him. And when we show such love to the Son, we enter into and participate in the love of the Godhead. God glorifies us, and we glorify God. In this way, failure is defeated. It is overcome, replaced by glory. Rejecting Christ, tragically, exposes us to God’s just condemnation.

In one way or another, failure reflects or expresses evil, but love reflects or expresses the goodness of God. Love defeats or overcomes evil and glorifies God, who alone is worthy of glory. At the end of time, there will be no more failure, sin or evil. There will be only God and those whom He has brought into relationship with Himself thru love.