

Message #1

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1 Peter

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FAILURE: THE BACK DOOR TO SUCCESS

LUKE 22:31-62

I.

On April 28, 1986, workers at the Forsmark nuclear plant in Sweden (PROJECTOR ON--- FORSMARK) on the Baltic Sea noticed unusually high radiation readings on their instruments. At first they thought that there was a problem at their plant. But reports began to come in that day from other places in the Scandinavian countries about high radiation readings. Investigators traced the prevailing wind currents southward into east central Europe.

That evening the official Soviet news organizations announced that the first nuclear accident in the country's history had happened a couple of days earlier. It wasn't the first accident in their history, but the news outlets went on to say that a nuclear reactor at Chernobyl near Kiev in the Ukraine (CHERNOBYL MAP) had been slightly damaged, which was also untrue. The Soviet media went on to describe all of the nuclear power mishaps in the United States and how much better the Soviet program was.

Three days later the Soviets announced that the situation was under control and that only two people had died in the accident. Only two people died initially, but the fire raged for nine days before it was contained. (CHERNOBYL DISASTER) Not until 18 days after the accident did the country's leader, Mikhail Gorbachev, make a public statement about the tragedy. Only later still did the Soviets admit the true extent of the catastrophe. About 200,000 people had to be evacuated from the area. An international conference on the disaster estimated that 4000 deaths would be attributed to what happened at Chernobyl. (PROJECTOR OFF)

The way that the Russian government responded to this major nuclear accident is typical of how we human beings often deal with failure. We initially deny it. If it can't be denied, we minimize it. We then compare our failure to the bigger failures of others. Then we point fingers in other directions.

I suspect that part of the reason that we tend to respond this way is that failure has the smell of death about it. But failure--- whether it is business failure, moral failure, family failure, or romantic failure--- does not have to be fatal. In fact it can be instrumental to success, but only if it is handled correctly.

Scott Peck's book, *The Road Less Traveled* (PROJECTOR ON--- ROAD LESS TRAVELED), sold 7 million copies and was on the *New York Time's* Best Seller list for over 13 years, longer than any other paperback book in history. Peck begins his popular book with the simple observation, "**Life is difficult.**" (PROJECTOR OFF)

That is often the case for us. It was certainly the case for Christians living in the first century. We concluded our study of the Gospel of John last Sunday. In Chapter 21 the Apostle John explained how Jesus dealt with Peter after his denial of Jesus. I thought that it might be fitting to follow up on that by looking at the first epistle that Peter wrote. What were the lessons that he learned from his failure, and how does he say that Christians should deal with a life that is often difficult? We Christians are not immune to the general vicissitudes of life, and sometimes there are extra challenges that come from our Christian commitment. But because this life is not all that there is and because Jesus is coming back some day, this life is worth living to the full. We need to hear the message of this little book about "how Christians should live in the light of Christ's return."

Central to a proper understanding of Peter's development of this theme is an appreciation of the life of the man who wrote the letter. Peter was a man who knew about the hardness of life. He was also a man who knew what it was like to experience failure in handling the trials that come across his path. So today we are going to look at the author of this epistle, and we are going to focus upon the incident in his life that had a major impact upon his development of maturity and godliness. We touched upon it in our study of John's gospel. We are using today Luke's more detailed description of Peter's behavior as our background for consideration of his failure.

II.

Let's consider first PETER'S BACKGROUND. (PROJECTOR ON--- PETER'S BACKGROUND) We know more about Peter than we do about any of the other twelve apostles. His Hebrew name was Simon. He was from Capernaum in Galilee. (CAPERNAUM MAP 2) Galileans, in the eyes of the people of Jerusalem and Judea, were hicks from the sticks.

Peter was married, although almost nothing is said about his family in the NT. By trade he was a fisherman. We saw in John #21 that he apparently pulled in a net loaded with 153 fish largely by himself. So he was a physically strong man.

In Acts #4 v. 13 (ACTS 4:13) he is called uneducated. That does not mean that he was illiterate. It means that he didn't have the formal religious education that a rabbi or priest would have. He was certainly a person of intelligence. We see that from his insights in his two epistles. Obviously he had studied and digested the Hebrew Scriptures. (PROJECTOR OFF)

Apparently Peter was a religious man, even before Jesus came along. In John #1 he and his brother Andrew are said to have been disciples of John the Baptist. By personality, Peter was an extrovert. He was impulsive, emotional, and expressive of his feelings. He had natural leadership abilities. He was decisive, committed, and courageous. Often we see him acting as spokesman for the other disciples. In the early church he continued to take the lead. On the Day of Pentecost it was Peter who addressed the large crowd of Jewish pilgrims who gathered around for an explanation of the miraculous phenomenon that they had just witnessed, involving the coming of the Holy Spirit.

Peter's decisiveness and boldness sometimes became hastiness and self-reliance. At times those strengths and weaknesses showed themselves at the same time. In response to Jesus' question in Matthew 16 (PROJECTOR ON--- MATTHEW 16:16) about who Peter understood Jesus to be, he confessed, **"You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."** Jesus commends him for that understanding. But a few moments later we find Peter rebuking Jesus for talk about being killed in Jerusalem. (PROJECTOR OFF)

On the Sea of Galilee we find him walking on the water at one moment. The next moment he is sinking and needing to be rescued by Jesus because of a lack of faith. At the Lord's Supper In John #13 we saw that Peter refused to allow the Lord to wash his feet. But when rebuked, he wanted to be washed all over.

Simon eventually matured to become Peter--- the rock, the leader of the early church, the author of two books of the Bible, a missionary and eventually a martyr for the Christian faith. Perhaps the biggest factor in this maturing process was not some great act of faith, not some great feat of courage, not some great demonstration of obedience, but rather a failure, a big failure, a major failure of commitment and faith.

III.

Let's look next at Roman numeral II in the outline, PETER'S FAILURE (AND OURS). (PROJECTOR ON--- II. PETER'S FAILURE...)The honesty of the Bible is refreshing. Unlike other books from the Ancient Near East, the Bible records the failings of its heroes as well as their successes. In the passage from Luke's gospel that was read for us we see the honest story of Peter's failure. There are five items to be noted about his failure.

A.

The first thing is that THE LORD ALLOWED IT. (II. PETER'S FAILURE... A. THE LORD...) The Lord allowed Peter to fail. Jesus Christ is God. He is sovereign. He could have prevented Peter from failing. He could have arranged events so that Peter had been prevented from entering the high priest's courtyard. He could have kept anyone from accusing Peter of having been with Jesus. But Jesus and God the Father allowed it to happen. The Lord wanted to use this experience to help Peter to mature.

That is an important lesson that we need to learn. At times we parents, teachers, church leaders, and bosses need to allow people to fail. Tom Watson (TOM WATSON), the founder and CEO of IBM for many years, understood this principle. Once a junior executive at IBM was involved in a risky venture that didn't pay off. In fact the failure cost the company \$10 million. When Watson called the nervous executive into his office, the young man blurted out, **"I guess you want my resignation."** Watson replied, **"You can't be serious. We've just spent \$10 million educating you."**

The *Harvard Business Review* (11/10/2017) quoted Coke CEO James Quincey (JAMES QUINCEY) talking about his company's mistake in trying to change the formula for Coke. The new chairman declared, **"If we're not making mistakes, we're not trying hard enough."**

When we parents see our children about to make an unwise decision, it is tough to stand by and watch it happen. (PROJECTOR OFF) Sometimes our responsibility is to step in and keep it from happening. In some situations the greatest education takes place when the child is allowed to fail.

In youth sports today some parents go to great lengths to keep their kids from losing. The Editor in Chief of *Psychology Today* magazine observed several years ago, **"Messing up ... even in the playground is**

wildly out of style. Although error and experimentation are the true mothers of success, parents are taking pains to remove failure from the equation.” (11/1/2004)

An accepting attitude on the part of the parent or leader is crucial. Jesus didn't reject Peter for his denial. Peters and Waterman examined the nation's best corporations in preparation for their book *In Search of Excellence*. Among other things the authors concluded, **“A special attribute of the success-oriented, positive and innovating environment is a substantial tolerance for failure.... Tolerance for failure is a very specific part of the excellent company culture.”** (p. 23) That is true not only for excellent companies but also for excellent churches and excellent families.

In the counseling that I have done I have often found it difficult to see people make decisions that I expect will lead to negative consequences. I have had to learn that I can give advice and make suggestions. But I have to allow people to fail and still be accepting of them. We are not to encourage or tolerate sin, but we should have an attitude of acceptance toward those who fail and toward those who make decisions that we think are unwise and expect will lead to failure.

B.

Not only did Peter fail because the Lord allowed it, but also he failed because he was guilty of ignorance. PETER WAS IGNORANT OF HIS OWN WEAKNESS. (PROJECTOR ON--- II. A. B. PETER WAS IGNORANT...) Jesus told His disciples the night before His crucifixion, “You disciples are all going to fall away and desert Me.” Peter replied, “Not me, Lord. I'll follow you to prison or to death. These other characters may deny you, but not me.” Peter failed to recognize the strength of his own sin nature, the wickedness of his own heart.

When we watch TV or read the newspaper and begin to think, “I would never commit that crime; I would never commit adultery; I would never deny Christ;” we had best watch out. We may be setting up ourselves for a big fall. We have weaknesses, and we have sin natures. We should not be ignorant of them. The Bible (1 CORINTHIANS 10;12) warns us in 1 Corinthians #10, **“Therefore let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall.”**

C.

Thirdly, Peter's failure stemmed from self-reliance. PETER WAS SELF-RELIANT. (II. B. C. PETERS WAS SELF-RELIANT) Boldness and decisiveness can be positive qualities of leadership. They were strengths that Peter possessed. But in our natural areas of strength we can easily come to depend upon our own

ability rather than upon the Lord. That is what happened to Peter. We saw that a couple of weeks ago in Peter's fishing experience when he and his companions could not catch any fish without help from Jesus. It has happened to me. It has probably happened to many of you.

It was easy for Peter to proclaim his loyalty to the Lord. But when Jesus led His disciples out to Gethsemane that night, he warned them to depend upon God. He said, **"Pray that you may not enter into temptation."** Three times He came back to find Peter and the other disciples asleep. When the arrest and other events quickly followed, Peter and his companions found themselves spiritually unprepared. They had not prayed. Peter proceeded to deny Jesus three times.

Many of us are gifted people. We have been blessed with natural talents in a number of areas. But those blessings can become a problem when we depend upon our own ability rather than upon the Lord. We need to realize that our needs are not partial but total. Prayer is the primary instrument for expressing that dependence upon the Lord.

D.

The fourth factor that contributed to Peter's failure was his tendency to act before he thought. PETER ACTED BEFORE HE THOUGHT. (II. C. D. PETER ACTED BEFORE...) Now I realize that this probably never happens to any of us. But Peter had this problem. He would burst out with statements like this: "Lord, stop this talk about being killed in Jerusalem." "Lord, you are not going to wash my feet." "Lord, I will never deny you."

When they came to arrest Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, we know from John's gospel that it was Peter who acted impulsively. He cut off the ear of a slave. Peter was active when he should have been passive. He needed to think more often before he spoke or acted.

Sometimes we men especially can be too quick to kid around. When I was a youth pastor, I had a teen in my youth group who had a marginal spiritual commitment and came to youth activities mainly because his parents made him go. One time this guy came to a weekend youth retreat, and at one of the meetings it was announced that there was a telephone call for him. When I saw him later acting normally with some of the other kids, I said to him, "Get a call from your stock broker?" He didn't say too much. But I found out later that the call was about an aunt who had suddenly died. I was never really able to reach this kid. My impulsiveness and attempt at being funny with him didn't help. Sometime we act or speak before we think.

E.

The fifth thing that contributed to Peter's failure was Satan. SATAN WAS INVOLVED. (II. D. E. SATAN WAS INVOLVED) Jesus says in our passage in v. 31, **"Simon, Simon, behold, Satan demanded to have you, that he might sift you like wheat..."** Tremendous spiritual battles were taking place here as the most significant event in human history since the Creation was about to take place. Jesus was involved in a spiritual battle as He faced the prospect of His imminent death.

Besides attacking Jesus, Satan was also pursuing the twelve disciples. He had gained mastery already over one. He hoped to defeat the others. If he could so weaken and defeat and demoralize the other eleven, especially Peter, then after Jesus left, there might not be anyone around to carry on His ministry. Jesus was prepared for His spiritual battle because He had prayed. The disciples, including Peter, were not prepared because they had not prayed. The best way for anyone to be prepared for spiritual battle is to maintain a regular habit of prayer. Not only is it good to set aside time each day to pray, but also we should remember to pray at moments when our mind is unoccupied--- when we are driving to work or when we are fixing supper or when we are standing in line.

One of the things that saddens me about the passing of Jerry is that our church has lost another prayer warrior. Jerry was one who was regularly committed to being involved in our Wednesday morning prayer time and in our weekly prison ministry prayer time. Oh that God would give us more prayer warriors.

III.

All of these factors contributed to Peter's failure. Fortunately his failure was not fatal. In fact it became foundational to his ultimate success. What made that possible was his response to failure. So let's consider PETER'S RESPONSE (AND OURS) TO FAILURE. (III. PETER'S RESPONSE (AND OURS)...))

A.

There were three aspects involved in Peter's positive response to failure. The first was that PETER REPENTED OF SIN. (III. A. PETER REPENTED OF SIN) He repented of sin. Some failures simply involve misjudgments. A positive response to misjudgments requires the acknowledgment of those bad

judgments. But some of our failures involve spiritual and moral wrongdoing. In those cases, and in Peter's case, repentance is necessary. We need to admit our sin to God and turn to Him for forgiveness. Sometimes we need to seek forgiveness from people whom we have wronged.

In v. 32 of our passage Jesus told Peter, **"...I have prayed for you, that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned again, strengthen your brothers."** In v. 62 we see that after his denial Peter went out and wept bitterly. But unlike Judas, Peter had sorrow that led to repentance. He admitted his sin and turned to the Lord. He became the godly leader of the early church.

The temptation that we face in failure is to refuse to accept responsibility. John F. Kennedy (PROJECTOR ON--- KENNEDY QUOTE) once remarked, in responding to the Cuban Bay of Pigs disaster, **"...victory has a hundred fathers and defeat is an orphan."**

I knew a fellow in my first church who was always getting fired. About twice a year it seemed that he would get fired from his job. I was amazed that he was able to keep getting new jobs. It seemed like it was only a little less often that he was being asked to find a new place to live. (PROJECTOR OFF)

The most frustrating thing is that it was always the company's fault or the landlord's fault. He just had the misfortune to run into bad companies, unreasonable bosses, intolerable working conditions, and unfair landlords. Because he failed to look at his own tardiness, his own irresponsibility, and his own self-centeredness, he never matured very much as a Christian.

When we experience failure in our lives, the first thing that we have to do to move on to success, to mature, is to acknowledge it and take responsibility for our misjudgments or sins.

B.

Not only did Peter repent of his spiritual failure, he also learned from it. PETER LEARNED FROM HIS FAILURE. (PROJECTOR ON--- III. A. B. PETER LEARNED FROM HIS FAILURE) After Jesus rose from the dead, He met with His disciples by the Sea of Galilee. In the incident that we looked at last week in John #21, Jesus asked Peter three times if he loved Him. Peter was painfully aware of his threefold denial of the Lord. The first time that Jesus asked Peter (JOHN 21:15) about his love for the Savior He said, **"Do you love me more than these---** that is, do you love me more than these other disciples do?"

According to Mark 14:29, some weeks earlier Peter (MARK 14:29) had said, **“Even though they all fall away, I will not.”** “Lord, I’m more committed than these other disciples. I’m better than they are.” Now Peter (JOHN 21:15) says simply, **“...you know that I love you.”**

Peter has learned from his failure. The pride and the boastfulness and the vanity are gone. So Jesus charges Peter to feed His sheep. (PROJECTOR OFF) One commentator says, **“The man who has fallen most deeply and learned most thoroughly his own weakness, is, or ought to be, best qualified to strengthen the weak.”** What replaced that pride and insensitivity was humility and sensitivity for others and a concern for spiritual alertness.

Reading through Peter’s epistle we are going to see that he learned from his failure and that it marked him in a positive way. (PROJECTOR ON--- 1 PETER 1:13) In #1 v. 13 he says, **“Therefore, preparing your minds for action, and being sober-minded, set your mind on the grace that will be brought to you.”** In #3 v. 8 (1 PETER 3:8) he writes, **“Finally, all of you, have unity of mind, sympathy, brotherly love, a tender heart, and a humble mind.”** Chapter 4 vv. 7 & 8 (1 PETER 4:7-8): **“...therefore be self-controlled and sober-minded for the sake of your prayers. Above all, keep loving one another earnestly, since love covers a multitude of sins.”** Chapter 5 v. 6 (1 PETER 5:6): **“Humble yourselves therefore, under the mighty hand of God”** Chapter 5 v. 8 (1 PETER 5:8): **“Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour.”** Peter learned from his failure.

C.

Failures can be a very good thing if we will accept responsibility for them and if we will learn from them. They can lead to success if, thirdly, we go on from there. PETER PERSEVERED IN THE FACE OF FAILURE. (III. B. C. PETER PERSEVERED IN THE FACE OF FAILURE) He persevered. Peter failed, but he did not allow himself to be a failure. He went on to follow the Lord. C.S. Lewis in *The Screwtape Letters* says, **“Satan’s strategy is to get Christians to become preoccupied with their failures; from then on the battle is won.”**

The Wallendas were in the news again last week. Nik and sister Lijana did their high wire act in Times Square in New York City. Their great grandfather Karl Wallenda was perhaps the greatest tightrope walker in the world. Shortly after he fell to his death in 1978, his wife recalled, **“All Karl thought about for three straight months prior to it was falling. It was the first time he ever thought about that, and it seemed to me that he put all his energies into not falling rather than walking the tightrope.”** (*Washington Post*, 7/7/2013) The successful Christian will acknowledge his failures, he will learn from them, and he will go on to follow the Lord by trusting in Christ. He or she will not be preoccupied by them.

Al was born in 1879 to a poor Jewish merchant. As a youth he suffered a haunting sense of inferiority because of the anti-Semitism that he encountered. His teachers regarded him as a misfit. At one point his parents took him to specialists to see if he was normal. In 1895 he failed his entrance exam to the Polytechnic University in Zurich. But (PROJECTOR ON--- ALBERT EINSTEIN) Albert Einstein rose above these early failures to become a success.

There was another fellow --- an American--- who experienced more failures than Einstein. This man's business went under in 1831. He ran for the state legislature in 1832 but was defeated. In 1833 he experienced another business reversal. In 1834 he succeeded in being elected to the state legislature. In 1835 his wife died. In 1836 he had a nervous breakdown. In 1838 he was defeated in a bid to become speaker of the state legislature. In 1840 he was defeated in an attempt to become a member of the Electoral College. In 1843 he was defeated in a run for Congress. In 1846 he did succeed in being elected to the US House of Representatives. But two years later he was defeated for reelection. In 1855 he was defeated in a bid for the US Senate. In 1856 he was beaten in a race for the vice-presidency of the US. In 1858 he lost again in a US Senate race.

But Abraham Lincoln (ABRAHAM LINCOLN) was not a failure. In 1860 he was elected President of the United States. He persevered in the face of failure.

We may never become an Einstein or a Lincoln or a Peter, but we may succeed in becoming what God wants us to become, if we learn to respond correctly to failure--- if we acknowledge our responsibility, if we learn from our failure, and if we determine to persevere in spite of our failures. We need to trust in a faithful God who will heal our wounds and carry us on to success.