

Overcoming the Fear of Failure

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Joshua 1:1-9, Matthew 25:24-27

The LORD Commands Joshua

Jos 1:1 After the death of Moses the servant of the LORD, the LORD said to Joshua son of Nun, Moses' aide:

Jos 1:2 "Moses my servant is dead. Now then, you and all these people, get ready to cross the Jordan River into the land I am about to give to them—to the Israelites.

Jos 1:3 I will give you every place where you set your foot, as I promised Moses.

Jos 1:4 Your territory will extend from the desert to Lebanon, and from the great river, the Euphrates—all the Hittite country—to the Great Sea on the west.

Jos 1:5 No one will be able to stand up against you all the days of your life. As I was with Moses, so I will be with you; I will never leave you nor forsake you.

Jos 1:6 "Be strong and courageous, because you will lead these people to inherit the land I swore to their forefathers to give them.

Jos 1:7 Be strong and very courageous. Be careful to obey all the law my servant Moses gave you; do not turn from it to the right or to the left, that you may be successful wherever you go.

Jos 1:8 Do not let this Book of the Law depart from your mouth; meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do everything written in it. Then you will be prosperous and successful.

Jos 1:9 Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be terrified; do not be discouraged, for the LORD your God will be with you wherever you go." [NIV]

A while back, a [Wall Street Journal](#) article reported on a survey in which men and women from all walks of life were asked, "What is it you fear most?" Contrary to expectations, the fear of death was ranked number three. The worst fear of all was the fear of failure.

Our competitive society conditions us to succeed at all costs. To fail, to mess up, to make a mistake is considered shameful and embarrassing. The pressure to succeed is so great, and the fear of failure is so strong, it is not unusual for a kind of paralysis to set in. Instead of moving out, taking action, doing what we need to do or feel called to do in life, we find it easier to do nothing, to play it safe, to remain where we are. We live far too cautiously for our own good, and we miss out on many God-given opportunities to be part of God's work in the world.

This was the problem with one of the servants in Jesus' famous parable of the talents. You will remember that three servants were given a sum of money by their master. One was given five talents, one was given, two talents, and the third servant was given just one. The other two men put invested their money and doubled their share. The third man, afraid to risk it, buried his talent in the ground. When the servants were called to account for the money that had been given them, the third man tried to justify his inaction:

"'Master,' he said, 'I knew that you are a hard man, harvesting where you have not sown and gathering where you have not scattered seed. So I was afraid and went out and hid your talent in the ground. See, here is what belongs to you.'

“His master replied, ‘You wicked, lazy servant! So you knew that I harvest where I have not sown and gather where I have not scattered seed? Well then, you should have put my money on deposit with the bankers, so that when I returned I would have received it back with interest.

The man’s talent was taken away from him and given to the one who had the most. Here was a man who was too cautious for his own good. He was unwilling to risk the possibility of failure. Ironically, his unwillingness to risk failure ensured it.

How many opportunities, how many blessings do we miss because of our own unwillingness to move out and take risks? What opportunities do we bury?

I wonder if Joshua was plagued by the fear of failure as he stood at the brink of the Promised Land. Joshua was Moses’ immediate successor, entrusted with the task of leading the people on into that Land promised to them by God. The challenges were daunting. The Jordan River had to be crossed, and there were flood conditions to be reckoned with. And there were many enemies in the land, who were not exactly crazy about thousands upon thousands of people entering their territory and settling in. On top of that was the added pressure of having to follow the likes of Moses as leader of the people – big shoes to fill! I wonder if Joshua’s knees knocked a little as he thought about what God was calling him to do. I wonder if fear was getting to him, for three times in the space of 9 verses, the Lord exhorts him, *“Be strong and courageous. I am with you wherever you go.”*

To Joshua’s credit, he did not allow himself to be paralyzed by the fear of failure, and took the Lord’s promises to heart. He moved out in spite of the risks, and the people crossed the Jordan and they experienced the Lord’s blessing.

Perhaps you find yourself up facing your own “Jordan.” There is a new challenge or opportunity before you, and you know you need to move, but it seems daunting and you doubt your ability to succeed. The possibility of failing or making a big mistake has you running scared. Perhaps you are considering making a career change, or going back to school. Perhaps you have been offered a promotion at work with greater responsibility and you wonder if you are up for it. Perhaps you sense that God is calling you to undertake some new venture or take up some new ministry or mission. Perhaps you feel called to solve some problem or to repair some troubled relationship. Perhaps you have lost your job and you have a big job interview coming up. No matter the challenge or the opportunity, the fear of failing, of messing up, of taking a wrong turn can paralyze us. And that can keep us from moving out and experience the kinds of changes that are necessary for our own spiritual growth.

How can you and I overcome the fear of failure?

It’s helpful to remember the obvious – we all fail – and therefore we should go easy on ourselves and admit our basic humanness. This is tough for the perfectionists among us. We all blow it and mess up: *“For all have sinned and have fallen short of the glory of God.”* The Bible is full of important people of faith who failed big time: Abraham was liar and doubted God’s promises; Jacob was a thief; Noah survived the flood but ended up in a drunken stupor-an embarrassment to his family; David committed adultery. And of course, it was the chief disciple, Peter himself, who failed so miserably – denying the

Lord three times. We could go on and on. Everybody fails, and it is somewhat comforting to know we are in good company.

Have you been fired from your job? Join the club. Lots of people have. Did you get a rejection letter from that school you were hoping to attend? So did many others. Did you fail that course you were taking? You can bet you weren't the only one. Did your business go under? So too, have many others. Did you blow that job interview? Who hasn't? To fail is human.

Some time ago, a technology company purchased a full-page ad in leading newspapers addressed this point. Maybe you remember it. The ad read:

You've failed many times, although you don't remember. You fell down the first time you tried to walk. You almost drowned the first time you tried to swim. Did you hit the ball the first time you swung a bat? Heavy hitters, the ones who hit the most homeruns, also strike out a lot. R.H. Macy failed seven times before his store caught on. English Novelist John Creasey got 753 rejection slips before he published 564 books. Babe Ruth struck out 1330 times, but also hit 714 home runs. Don't worry about failure. Worry about the chances you miss when you don't even try.

The real sin is not trying at all. The real sin is burying your talent, your opportunity in the ground.

I am fascinated by the life of President Theodore Roosevelt. I have read a number of biographies about him. Teddy was something of a Renaissance Man: he knew quite a bit about lots of things. He was, above all, a man of action. You could always find him out in front leading the battle, whether those battles be military (the Spanish-American War) or political. He dared great things, but also suffered some spectacular failures and defeats in the process. Few people lived as rich and as full a life as he. This is what Teddy says about a life worth living (famous words):

It is not the critic who counts; not the man who points out how the strong man stumbled or where the doer of deeds could have done them better. 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, and comes short again and again, because there is no effort without error and shortcoming; who does actually try to do the deed; who knows the great enthusiasm, the great devotion and spends himself in a worthy cause; who, at the worst, if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly...

Far better is it to dare mighty things, to win glorious triumphs even though checkered by failure, than to rank with those poor spirits who neither enjoy nor suffer much because they live in the gray twilight that knows neither victory nor defeat.

Yes, we all will fail. But the biggest failure is to not try at all.

That's the first thing to remember when you feel overcome by the fear of failure.

The second is this: failure is never final. Just because we fail, doesn't mean we, ourselves, are a failure. In fact, failure can make us better people, better able to tackle future challenges – that is, if we are careful to learn from them. Failure educates.

There is a story about Tom Watson, Sr., IBM's founder and its guiding inspiration for over 40 years. A promising junior executive of IBM was involved in a risky venture for the company and managed to lose over \$10 million in the gamble. It was a disaster. When Watson called the nervous executive into his office, the young man blurted out, *"I guess you want my resignation?"* Watson said, *"You can't be serious. We've just spent \$10 million educating you!"*

Could it be that our most valuable employees are those who have made the most mistakes?

Thomas Edison said he had 10,000 failures before he learned how to work the light bulb. He said he didn't call it a failure; he called it an education: *"I know 10,000 things that don't work."*

Failure is never final. It educates.

What's more, God promises to be there to help us get up from our failures and begin again, redirecting us to places God would rather have us be.

Those great people of faith we mentioned – Abraham, David, Peter – and so on – people who fell hard - found forgiveness and the possibility of a new beginning in God. Their failure was not final – God helped them get up again, and then went on to be a blessing...

Someone once asked Paul Harvey, the journalist and radio commentator, to reveal the secret of his success. He simply remarked; *"I get up when I fall down."* So for the Christian: *"I get up when I fall down."* We are going to fail, but with Christ at our side, we may get knocked down, but we will never be knocked out! It's all about getting up and trying again. And in Christ's power, we can.

That makes me think of the Apostle Paul, who got knocked down many times in his ministry, but he kept getting up – because of Christ in his life; In 2 Corinthians 4:8-9 he wrote, *"We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed."* Knocked down, but not knocked out. When he fell down, he got up again: *"I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me."*

The fact is, no failure, no mistake is so huge that God cannot bring us back to where he would have us be. I think of that well known verse in Romans: *"All things work together for good to those who love God, who are called according to his purpose."* "All things works together for good – yes, even our missteps and foul-ups.

No failure is final. God can take even our worst failures and turn them to our advantage, bringing blessing, for he always has our best interests at heart.

Everyone fails. And no failure is final in God's eyes, for we can learn from them and begin again. Remembering those things can go a long way to alleviating the fear of failure.

And, of course, whatever the challenge or the opportunity, we can know that the Lord goes with us. *"Be strong and courageous, for the Lord your God goes with you where you. Do not be terrified!"* In the words of the psalmist, *"The Lord is my light and my salvation, whom shall I fear. The Lord is the stronghold of my life, of whom shall I be afraid."* We can depend upon his power to re-direct our steps should we fail.

Why are we afraid of failing? Are we afraid of that a new job interview? Are we afraid we are not going to keep our job because of the economy? Are we afraid of failing in our marriage? Are we afraid of being single? Afraid of being a bad parent? What fear of failure is gripping our heart? Know that with Christ in our life, no failure is final. If we fall, we can get up again. Indeed, to know him is to have everything we need to lead a full and abundant life.

"Trust in the Lord, with all you heart, and lean not on your own understanding. In all your ways, acknowledge him, and he will direct your paths."