

Faith to Fail Forward

When I lived on LI there was a local word of faith church that had a program on the Christian radio station and the pastor would close every program with these words: *You fail? Impossible. All you need is faith.* Five days a week we heard that message: *You fail? Impossible. All you need is faith.* It's an attractive thought: I can erase failure from my life by having enough faith. Everything I put my hand to will succeed *if* I have enough faith. Faith will eradicate failure from my life.

This morning I want to suggest a different perspective on failure: it's not impossible, it's inevitable. In fact, we need to fail and be willing to fail. As NBA great John Wooden put it, if you're not making mistakes, you're not doing anything. The question isn't *will* you fail? At some point we all will. The question is, what will we do with our failure? Will failure send us into a downward spiral or be a stepping stone to a higher place? Will failure lead us to give up or lead us to try harder? Faith doesn't exempt us from failure, faith helps us fail and keep going. To take our failures and learn and grow from them. Faith helps us not be afraid of failure because we know the only way to never fail is to never try anything new, never take risks, never attempt big things. To coin a phrase from John Maxwell, faith helps us fail forward.

Most of us don't like to fail. We fear failure. I do. It's embarrassing, even humiliating to fail. We equate failing with being a failure. But the Bible can help us gain a more healthy perspective on failure. There are many examples in the Bible of people who failed but through perseverance, and with God's help, went on to succeed.

- Abram lied twice about his wife being his sister putting her and God's covenant promises at risk just to save his own skin. In spite of these failures, Abraham went on to become the father of Israel.
- Joshua's army was routed and humiliated by a weak little city called Ai. Joshua dealt with the sin in the camp, changed his strategy, and had a stunning success.
- Samson was overcome by his lust for Philistine women, Delilah cut his hair and the Philistines captured him and gouged out his eyes. Reduced to a blind, shackled slave, Samson was a flaming failure. But the Bible says his hair began to grow again and God gave him the strength to perform one final feat, killing more Philistines in his final act than throughout the rest of his life.
- David and Bathsheba – monumental moral failure, but God wasn't done with David and called him a "man after God's heart."
- Then of course, there's Peter, who denied Jesus three times. But that wasn't the end of Peter who went on to become the lead apostle in the church.

Let's look a little more closely at one more failure: a man named John Mark. His story begins in Acts 13 verse 1.

13 *Now there were in the church at Antioch prophets and teachers, Barnabas, Simeon who was called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen a lifelong friend of Herod the tetrarch, and Saul. ² While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, "Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them." ³ Then after fasting and praying they laid their hands on them and sent them off.*

This is a big moment in the history of the church, being the first missionary team being officially sent out

into unreached Gentile lands.

⁴ So, being sent out by the Holy Spirit, they went down to Seleucia, and from there they sailed to Cyprus. ⁵ When they arrived at Salamis, they proclaimed the word of God in the synagogues of the Jews. And they had John to assist them. Acts 13:1-5

Saul (later come to be known as Paul) and Barnabas are the power team of the early church and a young man named John is right there with them. As the church sends them off John is on the ground floor of the biggest, most ground-breaking missionary event in church history! Ground floor – there's Saul, Barnabas, and John Mark. That's it. John Mark is on the fast track to spiritual success.

But when they finally arrive at the darkly pagan, perilously dangerous Perga on their way to other unreached pagan peoples, it unnerves John and he deserts them. I mean, they barely set foot off the boat and John Mark gets back in the boat and heads back home! He must have felt like a failure, especially when he got back home and everyone's like "what happened? Why are you back so soon? Where are Saul and Barnabas?" It's a failure that stays with him when years later Paul and Barnabas decide to retrace their (successful) missionary steps and revisit the cities where they had planted churches. The account is found in Acts 15.

And after some days Paul said to Barnabas, "Let us return and visit the brothers in every city where we proclaimed the word of the Lord, and see how they are." Now Barnabas wanted to take with them John called Mark. But Paul thought best not to take with them one who had withdrawn from them in Pamphylia and had not gone with them to the work. And there arose a sharp disagreement, so that they separated from each other. Barnabas took Mark with him and sailed away to Cyprus, but Paul chose Silas and departed, having been commended by the brothers to the grace of the Lord. Acts 15:36-40

Paul said, can't have John Mark with us. He deserted us, he's a failure, I can't work with failures. Paul was, at this time, one of the most prominent Christian leaders in the church in the world. Can you imagine if you wanted to travel with Billy Graham in his heyday, but he said, "no, you failed me once. I can't have a failure like you on my team." Talk about the stigma of failure.

Thankfully Barnabas (whose name means "son of encouragement – he was built to be more compassionate and encouraging than Paul was) said, I can work with him. Paul and Barnabas separated – Paul to further missionary successes and Barnabas to less prominent but fruitful ministry, and a big part of that was helping Mark fail forward. Years later when Paul is in prison and most people have deserted him not wanting to risk being associated with him, he writes these words to Timothy:

Luke alone is with me. Get Mark and bring him with you, for he is very useful to me for ministry. 2 Tim. 4:11

It's ironic: at a time when others were deserting him, Paul recognized in John Mark a man who would stand by him. John Mark could have given up after his failure and dropped off the grid. Failure could have paralyzed him from taking further risks. Thank God there was a Barnabas with an encourager's heart to come alongside Mark and help him regain his footing.

I believe fear of failure is a real thing many of us deal with. And it can be paralyzing if we let it. It can take

us out before we even begin if we don't face our fears with faith. God is that Barnabas-encourager in our lives as He helps us grow a faith that fails forward. Share three steps towards a faith that fails forward.

1. The first step to failing forward is to admit that we would be total failures apart from Christ

The good news that John Mark was carrying with Barnabas and Paul was all about Christ succeeding where mankind failed. In spite of what we've achieved, the banner over human history is "failure" in all the deepest, most important categories of life. Adam and Eve's failure in the garden separated them from the God they once walked closely with, and that chasm between man and our Creator was a chasm that we could never bridge. We could never fix what was broken with God. We could never save ourselves from the eternal doom that inevitably awaited us. We couldn't even fix the side effects of our sin on our human relationships. Spiritually speaking, we were complete failures.

In contrast Jesus was a complete success! He came to teach us what God the Father is really like and he succeeded. He came to demonstrate the compassion of God by healing the sick and freeing the demon possessed and he succeeded. He came to live a perfectly obedient life in place of our sinfully disobedient lives and he succeeded. He came to bear all our sins on the cross and he succeeded. He came to seek and save the lost and he succeeded. That was the message Paul, Barnabas, and John Mark carried to a dark and dangerous land.

Before Christ we were total failures in every important area of life. But in Christ we are no longer total failures. Paul counters that thought in Rom. 8:37 when he writes, ³⁷ *No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.* More than conquerors means more than "not failures". It means we are more than successes! We fail forward when we confess honestly that we were and are total failures apart from Christ, but in Christ who loves us so deeply we are more than conquerors, more than successes, more than winners! We are beloved children and friends of God. We believe that our failure + Christ's success = more than conquerors!

2. A second step to failing forward is to let failure refine you without defining you

This really deals with how we interpret failure. I know a big part of my fear of failure is that I take it personally. I imagine that people are thinking not only did I fail I am a failure. It feels like it defines me as a loser. When we think of failure as something that defines us then suddenly failure goes to the heart of who we are as people. It's one thing to shake off a failure. It's another thing to shake off being a failure.

When something threatens our identity, it threatens who we are at our core. I remember when I was at Bible school they had an election to elect a class president. One of the guys who ran for class president was a guy named Doug. Doug was a nice guy and on the outside seemed like he was on a fast track to success. He was tall and handsome and had that "dressed for success" look. He came from a wealthy family, his father being a very successful NYC businessman. However with all this going for him someone else won class president and shortly afterwards I happened to come upon him and he was so despondent he didn't even want to continue in Bible school. He was depressed and when I asked him what was bothering him, he said it was because he didn't win class president. He interpreted it as

rejection from the class. As failure as a person. It came out that his father put so much pressure on him to succeed (as defined in a certain way) that he interpreted the failure to win as being a failure.

I couldn't exactly relate to how he was interpreting the class election thing. To me, it wasn't that big a deal. But there are things that have lodged in my heart that do tempt me to tempt certain failures as defining rather than refining. Where a perceived failure whispers to my heart: "you're a failure." Or, "people look at you as a failure" – which can be just as scary.

How can we be refined by failure without being defined by it? One thing, and this really helps us fail forward, is to own the failure, take responsibility for it, and seek to learn from it.

- Instead of denying the failure, admit you failed.
- Instead of blaming others (I failed because of so and so...), take responsibility for it.
- Instead of repeating the same mistakes over and over, seek to learn from your mistakes.
- Instead of thinking, "I'm a failure" think "that didn't work. Let's try something different."

John Mark really deserted Saul and Barnabas. That really happened. No excuses, no denying it. Later when Paul said, "I don't want him with us" he had legitimate reasons and those reasons were so strong that he and Barnabas – the dynamic duo – broke up and went separate ways.

John Mark failed. But he wasn't a failure and in the end when there were very few people Paul could count on, John Mark was one of those few that Paul would say, bring him to me – he is useful to me in the ministry. It's like Billy Graham in his later years calling you up and saying, "hey, I can't think of anyone I'd rather have working with me in the ministry than you. Are you available?"

An important step to failing forward is not believing the lie that because you fail you're a failure. Zig Ziglar said "remember failure is an event, not a person." Admit the failure but keep it in perspective. Everyone fails. Literally everyone. Believe what God says about you: you're more than a conqueror through him who loves you. We all lose some battles but in Christ we've won the war!

3. A third step to failing forward is to see failure as an essential step towards progress

I think it's safe to say that the John Mark that Paul sought out to join him was a different man than the John Mark who deserted Paul and Barnabas. Decades of going forward, growing forward, and working with and learning from Barnabas meant he had more to contribute to the ministry than he had decades earlier when he failed.

But if John Mark had stopped there, if he had allowed this bad experience to define him and paralyze him, he wouldn't be any different. Time doesn't change us, the years don't mature us, experiences don't make us wiser. It's what we do with the time, what we learn from the experiences that grow us and make us wiser. If we keep going forward, not liking the failure but determined to learn from it, we grow. But if failure causes us to stop, we stay the same.

It's amazing how this thinking can get into us at a young age and affect us for our entire lives. You have a bad social experience as a kid and whenever a situation arises that reminds you of that experience, you're afraid of it being repeated. We start avoiding failure rather than pursuing opportunities. We spend more energy trying not to make mistakes than we do trying to make progress.

We can get stuck in what John Maxwell calls the cycle of fear: fear of failure leads to inaction. Because we don't act, we don't gain experience in that area. Lack of experience leads to an inability to handle similar situations. And that in turn feeds our fears. That's the cycle: Fear leads to inaction. Inaction leads to inexperience. Inexperience leads to inability. Inability feeds the fear. Cycle.

Fear of failure can not only paralyze us from attempting new things, and from taking risks, it can also create a mindset in us that if we do try something and it goes a little wrong, we decide we're not going to try doing that again. As if something has to go perfect the first time to make it something we should do again.

If you're a football fan, you probably remember the Cowboys winning three Superbowls in four years back in the 90's. The quarterback that led them to these victories was Troy Aikman. What you may not remember is that Troy Aikman's first year as a starter was the definition of failure: his first game resulted in a 28-0 loss to the Denver Broncos. His second game he threw two interceptions and lost to the Falcons. He finished his first season as a starter with a 0-11 record. 0 wins. 11 losses. Not one single win. I'm sure a lot of frustrated people said if that doesn't tell you he's a failure, I don't know what does. If he had given up, if he had listened to detractors who said he had no talent, he never would have gone on to win three Superbowls.

So I'm not going to end this message by saying, "you fail? Impossible! All you need is faith." But I do feel like the Lord is saying to many of our hearts, "you fail? Excellent! All you need is faith." Faith to fall forward. To believe God to take our failures and turn them into successes.

Winston Churchill once said, "Success isn't final. Failure isn't fatal. It's the courage to continue that counts." Continuing in the face of failure is more than half the battle. To be more than a conqueror we need a challenge to conquer. Failure is one of the challenges Jesus wants to empower us to overcome. Let's look at failure differently and go for new conquests in Christ!