

## *What God Can Make of Our Flops*

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Texts: Luke 22:31-34; John 21:1-19

**I like those historical movies** where they tell you at the end credits what happened to the real characters later in life. “So-and-so spent five years in prison for his crime and went on to become an Illinois senator.” Or how about that website where they show pictures of what-happened-since to the now grayed and baldy characters of *The Partridge Family* and *Happy Days*.

Ever wonder what happened after the Gospel narrative to characters like Peter and John and James and Mary? We only have ancient church tradition to inform us, really.

The most post-New Testament information we have of any of them is Peter. This, for instance, we can fairly surmise from tradition: that as long as Peter told the Gospel story, he never failed to recount his colossal failure in that courtyard the night of Jesus’ trial. In fact, this story left a big mark on the consciousness of the early Church that is one of the very few included in all four Gospels.

What gave this incident such appeal to the early Church? I have a theory. Because it reminds us that even the best of us, even the chief of Jesus’ disciples, fail. And it reminds us what good God can make of our failures.

And aren’t you glad of it? For who of us has not, like Peter, had *our* lapse of courage, *our* falling short of our best ambitions, *our* flights from duty and loyalty, *our* failures of friendship and love, *our* inadequacy of devotion to the Christ who gave himself a ransom for our souls?

“*Simon, Simon,*” said Jesus, “*Satan has obtained permission to sift all of you like wheat, but I have prayed for you that your own faith may not fail; and you when once you have turned back, strengthen your brothers and sisters.*”

Here in this one paragraph, Jesus pulls back the curtain on His perspective of the faults and failures that he could foresee Peter and the other disciples would stumble into that fateful night. If we take a closer look at Jesus’ perspective, perhaps we may find our view of our own flops and failures changed and encouraged.

The first thing we see in this passage is the role God plays in the events of adversity that come to test our lives.

“*Satan has obtained permission to sift all of you like wheat, but I have prayed for you that your own faith may not fail.*”

Who is the source of this testing? Who sends the trouble and pressure and pain and chaos that tempt us to discouragement and defeat? Is it God?

“*Satan has obtained permission to sift you as wheat.*”

It reminds me of the book of Job, where Satan was likewise granted permission to afflict Job with setback, sorrow and sickness. The name *Satan* means *Accuser* and *Adversary*. He is the embodiment of all that rises up to oppose and defeat and doom us.

God does not send the opposition, the adversity that tempts us to defeat. But neither does God shield us from it. Here’s what God does do: God sustains us through it. “I have prayed for you,” said Jesus, “that your faith may not fail.”

Why didn't God spare Peter and the disciples from the trial of that night? Why doesn't God shield us from the ordeals of our lives? The stumbling and struggling and striving? The falling and the failing?

Because there are things we can learn from these stumbling ordeals that we cannot learn from success. "I have prayed for you," said Jesus.

Christ is right there with us, praying for us, pulling for us, through the flops and letdowns of our lives to turn them to our benefit.

What benefit?

This first of all: the growth of **our own self understanding**.

"Satan has demanded to *sift you like wheat*." Do you know what that is, to sift something like wheat? It means putting it in a sieve and shaking it violently so that the good is separated from the bad.

Failure does that to a person, doesn't it? It shakes us out. It separates the wheat from the chaff. It makes us take stock of our lives and our life's ambitions. It makes us look at hard facts and discover things about ourselves that we might never otherwise have discovered.

Here's another benefit that God can bring to us through our failure—not only of better understanding ourselves, but of better understanding of God and God's generous confidence in us. " ... *and you, when you have turned back...* " said Jesus.

Notice that Jesus doesn't say, *if*, but *when*. He sees the shortcomings in Peter that will lead to his downfall. But he sees beyond the failure. He sees, with confidence, what this failure will make of Peter in the end.

Have you ever had one of those special people in your life who when you were knocked down refused to give up confidence in you? Such people are gold!

That's the kind of friend Jesus is and God is. Knowing full well the failure of loyalty Peter would make of that night, Jesus still had the confidence in Peter to declare: "*when you have turned back, strengthen your brothers.*"

After Jesus was raised, John's Gospel tells us, Jesus confronted the deflated and defeated Peter. "Do you love me?" He asked him three times. "Yes Lord," Peter replied. "Feed my sheep," said Jesus.

Even after Peter's terrible lapse of loyalty, Jesus turns right around and entrusts the care of his church right back into Peter's bumbling hands.

And what impact did Christ's generous confidence have on his hapless apostle? History tells us that the same Peter, who so shamefully denied Jesus in the courtyard, went on later in life to be crucified upside down for him.

Which brings us to something else that Peter's failure taught him and that our failures can teach us. Not only of Christ's confidence in us, even in the midst of our failures, they teach us our limitations.

That night when Peter followed Jesus into the courtyard he was running on his own steam, relying on his own inner store of courage and confidence. "I am ready," he said. "I am ready to follow you to both prison and death. Even though everyone else forsakes you, I will not" Peter had to learn what our failures sooner or later must teach us all: That there are certain things we cannot do on our own, however we might wish to; there are certain challenges we can't rise to alone, however we might will to. We need to

*rely on* a power greater than ourselves. We need to discover the dividing line between what we can do, and what we must look to God to do.

“God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.”

The wisdom to know the difference, where do we get it? More often than not, we get it from our experiences of failure. It’s only through hard experience that most of us discover that we can’t fill God’s shoes.

Here’s something else this passage suggests to us.

“And when you have *turned back*,” said Jesus to Peter, “strengthen your brothers and sisters.”

When you have turned back! Here is a key element in making the most of our failures. There must be a turning back. A turning back to the challenge. A getting back on the horse, if you will. Peter betrayed the Lord. He turned tail. He ran. But he *turned* and went back to the challenge. And that we all must do if we are ever to make the most of our failures.

If Peter had walked away from his calling, if he’d said, “That’s it. I’ve had it. I’ll never cut the grade. I’m out.” He never would have become the man that he became or had the place in history that he had or changed the people’s lives he changed.

Few of us ever become effective at any enterprise without failing at it. And when we fail, it is not a sign to quit. It may be a sign to turn back and try again and again, until we learn to be effective at what we’re doing. The person who does not give himself the freedom to fail does not give himself the chance to improve.

“How do you succeed?” asked a young novice of an old expert.

“Right decisions,” said the expert.

“How do you make right decisions” countered the novice.

“Experience,” said the master.

“How do you get experience?” plied the novice.

“Wrong decisions,” said the master.

There’s yet another benefit that our passage suggests that God can bring to us through our failures.

“When once you have turned back, *strengthen your brothers and sisters*.”

What is it about failure that gives us the resource to encourage and strengthen others? Well, you can’t help another person who’s failed while you’re judging him. You can’t lift up a person whose been knocked down, while you’re figuring he got just what he deserved. You can’t lend strength to a soul that has fallen to weakness while you’re thinking you’re better than he is and it could never happen to you.

Nothing so cures such an attitude of judgmental hubris better than a good dose of ones own shortcoming.

The high priest’s courtyard was Peter’s training ground for the most important of all Christian virtues: the virtue of mercy. He who receives mercy, said Jesus, is much more apt to grant it. He who receives grace is much more apt to be graceful. She who squares up to her own weakness is much more apt to tolerate the weakness of others.

“When you have turned back,” said Jesus to Peter, “strengthen your brothers and sisters.”

So then, am I suggesting that failure is a good thing? That we should go out and fail so we can taste failure’s sweet benefits? No. Success, particularly in the pursuit of God’s loving purposes, should always be our ambition. But when we do fail, whether at a business venture or at a spiritual endeavor, whether at friendship or patience or loyalty—it is good to know and remember that God sticks with us and pulls for us, that if we give God the chance, God can make something redemptive of our failures; that God’s will for us, even when we flop, is our enrichment and blessing.

“We know,” said Paul the apostle, “that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to God’s purpose.”\*

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\* Romans 8:28, New American Standard Bible