

THE SEASON OF FAILURE

John 21:3-6

Growing in the Seasons of Life Series
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As we continue through the seasons of life we are focusing today on The Season of Failure. Now sooner or later, no matter who we are, each one of us will have times of failure. Yet what is most important is that we know how to deal with it when it comes.

Ecclesiastes, Chapter 3, tells us, *“For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven...a time to seek and a time to lose.”* So in the life of a believer my friends, a season of failure is not something to try to avoid, rather it is something to be embraced.

In John 21:3 we read the powerful words, *“That night they caught nothing.”* Now this happened shortly after the resurrection. The tomb is empty. Some of the disciples had actually seen Jesus. Now shouldn't this be a time of glorious victory, of success for the kingdom of God? Why is it that in the dead of night we see some disciples fishing on the Sea of Galilee?

The truth is that these were not glorious days for these disciples. They were deeply frightened after seeing Jesus put to death on the cross. Who knows maybe they would be next. They were actually in total despair wondering what they should do. Peter, however, says he is going to do what he did before Jesus called him to follow him. “I’m going fishing,” he said.

So that night Peter and some of the other disciples worked very hard fishing. They put out their nets and pulled them in yet they were empty every time. That night they caught nothing. Can you imagine the feelings in the boat? It was like adding insult to injury. This was definitely a time and season of failure where nothing seemed to go right.

I read a testimony a few years ago by a man named, Dr. Hart, who shared about his season of failure. At age 25 in England he was a young engineer. One day he went to his boss and shared how he could really use, in being able to do a better job in this company, an advanced math degree. The boss agreed and said he would pay for him to go study and learn.

Dr. Hart was married with two small girls at that time. So he went and studied for a whole year. At the end of the year in the British system he took an examination that if he would pass he would move onto the next year. Yet if he failed it he would go back again to the beginning of the first year.

Known as a math whiz Dr. Hart studied hard. Yet when he went to take the examination he began to panic. He started telling himself that he was going to fail and that only made it worse. This anxiety finally overwhelmed him so much that he had to close the exam booklet, hand it in and leave. He had never failed a test in his life. What was he going to tell his wife, his boss who had paid for all this? He went home and for the next two months was in a deep depression.

He felt that God had let him down and had failed him. One day he was paging through the university catalogue and it fell open to the psychology section. He started to read and within a few weeks he had enrolled in the psychology program. Now a number of years later Dr. Hart has written 20 books on the integration of psychology and theology.

The question he asks is was failing that examination a failure? He came to the realization that it was not. Rather, it was God's gentle nudge toward a new direction. It was an experience that opened up a new path. If he had passed, he says, he would not be the person he is today.

Part of the problem, my friends, is that we live in a success driven culture. Success is often seen as our national religion and therein lies many of our problems. I may know how to handle success and successes. My problem, however, is that I may not know how to handle failure. Yet in the same way we also don't know what real success is.

Part of the problem of living in a success driven culture is that we often also believe that being successful is the evidence of God's blessings upon us. Yet that's the biggest myth and satanic lie in the church today—that success is the proof that God is blessing us. God is not in the success business. He is in the refining and growth business.

Now there are many faces of failures. Sometimes failure is a disappointment. Sometimes someone lets us down and we feel as if we have failed. It often doesn't take very much to make us feel like failures. Perhaps someone in a friendship, or in a marriage, has abandoned you and you feel like a failure. Failure takes many forms.

Now why does this kind of failure devastate us so much? Well, the first reason is because it points out our imperfections. We lack the courage to be imperfect. We feel like we've got to be perfect, always strong, always successful. I believe that God has to allow us to fail from time to time in order to teach us that we are not perfect.

The Apostle Paul said in Philippians 3:12, *“Not that I've already obtained (perfection), or have already reached the goal, but I press on to make it my own.”* We are not perfect now—not one of us. We are in process. You need to have the courage to be imperfect.

The second reason why failure devastates us is because we confuse failing with being a failure. How many failings does it take to make a failure? In reality the only time I become a failure is the day I give up. As long as I keep trying, keep striving forward, I am not a failure.

One young boy suffered from depression most of his early life, most of his childhood he cried himself to sleep. He actually failed the sixth grade. In his prestigious English boarding school he was teased because of his funny body and big head. One day the school master actually sent a note home that said, “This young man shows a conspicuous lack of success.” This person was the great statesman, Winston Churchill.

There was a young man at the University of Bern in Europe who presented his doctoral dissertation. It came back with bold words written across the front page, "This thing is irrelevant and fanciful." So Albert Einstein took his dissertation elsewhere.

Beethoven was told by his teacher that he would be hopeless as a composer. Walt Disney was fired in his early life by a newspaper because he didn't have any creative ideas.

There was a mother in Iowa who had a visit from the village schoolmaster to tell her that her son was not doing well in school and that he would probably do better working on the farm. Yet the mother refused. She brought him home and started to tutor him herself. Later on this grown up man wrote these words, "When everybody else is quitting on a problem that is the time to begin." His name was Thomas A. Edison.

What should we do with failure? First, make God part of it. Bring God in so he can help us to put it all in the proper perspective. We need to always remember that in the perspective of eternity and of God's plan for your life this failure won't seem as big.

A second thing we need to do with failure is to learn how to grow from it. Failures are for growing. Or as John Maxwell says in his excellent book, *"Failing Forward,"* it is the opportunity to use the lessons learned from that failure to change your life.

Someone has said, "Success is built upon a mountain of failures." The late Erma Bombeck shared how she was invited onetime to a banquet of highly successful people. She became curious about what highly successful people talk about. Yet as she went from group to group she discovered that most every conversation was on how these people had learned from their failures and mistakes.

The third thing we need to do with our failure is forget it. The problem with most failure is that we can't forget it. We lie awake at night. We punish ourselves with it. We start to feel as if we are no good. Yet this reaction usually imprisons us and makes us want to give up. We need to ask God to help us; to learn as much as we can from it and then move on.

Now back to the story of Peter and the fishermen. That story doesn't end with the phrase, "That night they caught nothing." Rather, Jesus was standing on the shore. He called to them and said, *"Cast the net to the right side of the boat, and you will find some."* *"So they cast it, and now they were not able to haul it in because there were so many fish."*

Where is Jesus when you fail, my friend? He is on the seashore. When your life is finally told you will see that there really were no failures. Only the hand of a gentle, loving, guiding God refining and building you up to be the person he wants you to be.

That's what he wants for you if you will live by faith in him. Because it is in failure that God often does his finest work in the hearts of his children. It is in failure that he calls us to trust him even more and to let down our nets on the other side.