

Things That Make Us Strong—Failure  
Equipping on the 8's  
Sunday, April 19, 2015

Failure is such a major topic of conversation in every arena of life. I've heard salesmen; pastors; doctors; lawyers; teachers; carpenters; plumbers; and everything in between talk about the times they failed.

Earlier this week someone sent me an e-mail asking if I had ever written about a particular topic. I remember that I had written something and told them I would search for it but made no promises. Finally I found it. It was something I had written about six years ago. But when I read it, I was so discouraged that I wouldn't share it with them. I couldn't believe how bad it was.

I spent some time thinking about my reaction to what had been written six years ago. When I declared it to be a failure as my attempt to write, I was comparing it to what and how I write today. Based on today, I would have to say it was a failed attempt. But based on what I knew at the time, it perhaps was not a failure.

But I still wouldn't send it. I found some other things to send them, written by others. ☺

There are so many great stories surrounding the topic of failure. Abraham Lincoln lost every election he participated in until he ran for President. Thomas Edison would by many be considered a failure based upon the number of times his experiments failed. Here's a great story about Edison I ran across this week:

"Thomas Edison invented the microphone, the phonograph, the incandescent light, the storage battery, talking movies, and more than 1000 other things. December 1914 he had worked for 10 years on a storage battery. This had greatly strained his finances. This particular evening spontaneous combustion had broken out in the film room. Within minutes all the packing compounds, celluloid for records and film, and other flammable goods were in flames. Fire companies from eight surrounding towns arrived, but the heat was so intense and the water pressure so low that the attempt to douse the flames was futile. Everything was destroyed. Edison was 67.

With all his assets going up in a whoosh (although the damage exceeded two million dollars, the buildings were only insured for \$238,000 because they were made of concrete and thought to be fireproof), would his spirit be broken? The inventor's 24-year old son, Charles, searched frantically for his father. He finally found him, calmly watching the fire, his face glowing in the reflection, his white hair blowing in the wind. "My heart ached for him," said Charles. "He was 67—no longer a young man—and everything was going up in flames. When he saw

me, he shouted, ‘Charles, where’s your mother?’ When I told him I didn’t know, he said, ‘Find her. Bring her here. She will never see anything like this as long as she lives.’”

The next morning, Edison looked at the ruins and said, “There is great value in disaster. All our mistakes are burned up. Thank God we can start anew.” Three weeks after the fire, Edison managed to deliver the first phonograph.”

I was also reading in a local magazine this past week about former World Heavyweight Boxing Champion Floyd Patterson. Not only was he the World Heavy Weight Champion but he also holds the record for being knocked down the most times. But he also holds the record for getting back up more than anyone else.

There’s always two ways to look at things. What we consider to be failure may be something that really opens up an entirely different realm of thinking or of doing things for us.

There are also a number of folks in Scripture that by some standards, fortunately not God’s standards, could be considered as failures.

- When Abraham should have stayed in the land and trusted the Lord, he fled to Egypt because of the drought. And this was by no means the last of Abraham’s failures.
- Moses, in trying to help his people, ran ahead of the Lord and killed the Egyptian. Later, against the command of God, he struck the rock in his anger.
- When David should have been out in the field of battle, he stayed home and committed adultery with Bathsheba and then plotted the murder of her husband.
- Peter, in spite of his self-confidence and his great boast, denied the Lord, as did the rest of the disciples who fled before the evening our Lord’s arrest was over.

As I was looking over several Scriptures in preparation for our time, I read from the New Testament Christ gave the disciples instructions about how to act when they were being sent out two by two. Turn with me to Luke 9:1-5.

I suppose by some standards being sent out by Christ like this, we might consider it a failure when folks chose to reject us. But was it failure? What was happening? Did someone get saved? Probably not. Did someone get healed? Probably not. Was the person being sent out learning? Were they growing in their relationship with God? I would think the answer to both of those questions would be yes. There was something going on at a level we couldn’t see. We can only see the rejection. We can’t see what’s happening at a different level. Was that failure? I think not.

There's another belief that has been present from very early on. That belief is that if we have faith, we won't have problems. Scripture seems to present evidence to the contrary.

Job 14:1 says, "Mortals, born of woman, are of few days and full of trouble.

John 15:18 says, "If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first."

John 16:33 says, "I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world."

Psalms 19:34 says, "The righteous person may have many troubles, but the LORD delivers him from them all;"

So perhaps we can't view difficulties in life as being failure.

As I was reading through Scripture I came upon Proverbs 24:16. It says, "for though the righteous fall seven times, they rise again, but the wicked stumble when calamity strikes."

The context of this verse is that it is contrasting a battle between the righteous and the wicked. The righteous person defeats the wicked person simply because they get back up more than the wicked.

The number "seven" is used here not as a specific number but as term meaning "many times." And the word "fall" here is simply being knocked down and not a moral failure as is so often implied when the word "fall" is used.

It's a principle that people like Floyd Patterson knew. He knew he was going to be knocked down from time to time but he also knew he had to get back up.

The Apostle Paul knew what it was to have failure in his past. He also knew what it was to get knocked down. But he learned that getting back up could open up a whole new realm of thinking.

One thing I believe about the Apostle Paul is that he viewed his past life as failure. Often we read Paul's list of credentials from his past as being impressive or even as being honorable but that's not how Paul viewed these things. Look with me in Philippians 3 with me.

Floyd Patterson, Thomas Edison, Nehemiah, the Apostle Paul and many others knew something that we need to make sure gets into our thinking. Their focus was one thing and one thing only.

Edison was focuses on seeing the light bulb glow or hearing the phonograph play. Patterson was focused on wearing the Heavy Weight Champions Belt; Paul was focused on the prize that was set before Him. Jesus was focused on the cross and obeying the Father.

Turn with me to Philippians 3: “If someone else thinks they have reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more: <sup>5</sup> circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; <sup>6</sup> as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for righteousness based on the law, faultless. <sup>7</sup> But whatever were gains to me I now consider loss for the sake of Christ.<sup>8</sup> What is more, I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them garbage, that I may gain Christ <sup>9</sup> and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in<sup>[a]</sup> Christ—the righteousness that comes from God on the basis of faith.<sup>10</sup> I want to know Christ—yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, <sup>11</sup> and so, somehow, attaining to the resurrection from the dead. <sup>12</sup> Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already arrived at my goal, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me.<sup>13</sup> Brothers and sisters, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But **one thing** I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, <sup>14</sup> I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.

I believe the idea of “one thing” may have a lot to do with what we determine to be failure or not. The idea of “one thing” has kept many folks going long after many of the rest of us would have stopped. Note how the phrase is used in the following Scriptures:

When the rich young ruler came to Jesus inquiring about what it took to inherit eternal life.

Mark 10:21 “Jesus looked at him and loved him. “One thing you lack,” he said. “Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.”

When Jesus was at the home of Martha and Mary. Martha was grouching about Mary sitting at the feet of Jesus instead of helping prepare supper.

Luke 10:42 “But few things are needed—or indeed only one thing. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her.”

The formerly blind man made a great statement John 9:25 He replied, “Whether he is a sinner or not, I don’t know. One thing I do know. I was blind but now I see!”

In Psalm 27 David was faced with the presence of many enemies who would have loved to end his time here on the earth. David was asking God to protect him so that he could dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of his life. He valued that so much that nothing else really mattered.

Psalm 27:4 “One thing I ask from the LORD, this only do I seek: that I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to gaze on the beauty of the LORD and to seek him in his temple.”

One final example from Scripture is Nehemiah. I’ve spent a great deal of time in this book. The life of Nehemiah is such a great example for us. He leads a group of people back to Jerusalem in order to repair the wall and set the gates of the city in place. He spent months praying about what God wanted him to do about the disgrace and danger that was being faced in Jerusalem. He was given a plan and he stayed true to it.

In chapter 4 encounters opposition from enemies but he stays on the job. In chapter 5 opposition from within the ranks of those he was working with rose up but he stays on the job. Then in chapter 6 the opposition takes aim at him. The enemy, a man named Sanballat, tries to lure Nehemiah out of the city to a place called “Ono.” But he says, “oh no” and stays on the job. Listen to Nehemiah’s response to his enemies when they try and distract him. It comes from Nehemiah 6:

Nehemiah 6:3 “So I sent messengers to them with this reply: “I am carrying on a great project and cannot go down. Why should the work stop while I leave it and go down to you?”

Nehemiah knew the importance of “one thing” in his life.

My question before we leave today is what is the “one thing” God has put in front of you that causes you to get back up when life knocks you down?

Take a moment and write down a word or two about this thing on your study sheet. Now let’s pray that God will instill a desire within us for that one thing.