

The Fear of Failure

Below are a couple of email responses I sent recently to a college baseball coach when he asked me, "Does the Bible have anything to say about failure?"

Coach,

I've been thinking through the issue of failure and the Biblical examples of it, they're all over the place.

- Moses failed by committing murder and was exiled for 40 years, but came back to Egypt and was used of God in a powerful way.
- David the king failed by committing adultery with Bathsheba and conspiring to have her husband killed, but was restored and was used of God in a powerful way.
- Peter the apostle failed by denying that he knew Jesus three times, but was used of God in a powerful way.
- Judas failed by betraying Jesus for 30 pieces of silver and hung himself in despair.
- Three utter failures who were restored and one failure who lost all hope and was destroyed.

These were Jesus' words to Peter, even before he was to fail later that same night, "Simon, stay on your toes. Satan has tried his best to separate all of you from me, like chaff from wheat. Simon, I've prayed for you in particular that you not give in or give out. When you have come through the time of testing, turn to your companions and give them a fresh start."

The point seems to be that failure is the human condition, but that we can press through it, we can be restored and emerge better than we were before the failure. That has certainly been my experience through 53 years. I have failed plenty, but I trust God to make me better through the experience.

Baseball is built on failure and recovery. A hitter goes to the hall of fame if he fails 2/3 of the time. Hitting is one player vs. nine, a perfect design for failure. It takes 4 balls to walk, but only 3 strikes for an out. Just throwing strikes is terribly challenging for pitchers.

It seems that the ones who deal best with failure are the ones who don't treat it as an enemy, but as an ally. They strongly pursue success and excellence, but know that short-term failure is inevitable and they learn from it and improve. The batter who strikes out his first three at bats can come up in his 4th and get the game winning hit. Suddenly successful in the midst of failure.

Coach's reply

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Thank you so much, Roger. I have read this, and I am going to save it and reread it on occasion. I have to remind myself that failure in baseball is inevitable. I just do not like it; and because of that, I take the losses way too personally and way harder than I accept the wins. Thanks for caring.

My reply:

Sadly failure is not only a part of baseball, but life in general. I also take losses in sport personally and feel them at the heart. To do otherwise feels like betrayal to me. I feel I owe it to my teammates to care deeply and to feel the sting of loss as acutely as I feel the exhilaration of victory.

I believe that's a part of what Christ Jesus has done for us, to give us hope beyond the failure and to fuel our hearts for competing our hearts out again in the next game, the next day, the next treatment. Let's both commit ourselves to pressing through life's failures to experience Christ's gift of hope and faith.

Summary:

I believe the Lord uses such communication, simple and direct, in a similar way to the way He uses epistles in the New Testament. Paul wrote to his disciples and churches he had founded very directly, whereas he was much more gentle when face to face. Let's prayerfully consider the power of the written word as a way to communicate God's heart for the people of sport and then we can follow up those words with face to face, compassionate and caring relationship building.



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