

Face Up to Failure

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[0:00] We've been learning, or perhaps I should say relearning, what it means to follow Jesus. We're called to follow Jesus. And following King Jesus, it's the greatest adventure imaginable.

! It involves repentance, faith, learning to listen to God's Word, sharing God's Word, becoming more like Jesus, having our minds changed.

It's a wonderful journey, and we have so much more to look forward to as well. And then one day we get to meet our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, in person.

No. But do you ever feel like a failure as a follower of Jesus?

Or do you ever worry what will happen if one day you might fail Jesus? If you do, then this talk is for you.

[1:05] This is a final talk from Mark's Gospel, and we're here to talk about failure. We're going to talk about failure because Jesus is a realist. Because Jesus himself talked about failure with his disciples.

Because he knew they would fail him. And he knows that you and I, even with our very best intentions, will in some way fail or fumble along the way as followers of Jesus.

And here's the bottom line. Thankfully, Jesus never fails us. And even when we fail him, he has everything under control.

We've sung some songs this morning which I think were just perfectly chosen for this theme. Our sins are many, but his mercy is more. He's prepared for the worst.

He's done everything necessary despite our failures. So that we can get up again and we can go on serving him in spite of all our weaknesses, in spite of all our failures.

[2:10] So let's see how that comes out of Mark 14, 27 to 31. Just a very short passage today. I don't know what you picture when you think of the disciples.

I'm not sure if you have a kind of a saintly picture of Peter and Andrew and all the rest. But the fact is, the simple fact is that like you and me, the 12 disciples were sinners.

They were far from perfect. And Mark's gospel, I think more than any other gospel, really drives that home. If you were to read Mark's gospel from start to finish, I think you just won't see the 12 in the same light ever again.

They are afraid. They lack faith. They are hard-hearted. They are dull. They lack understanding.

They're constantly stunned by the things that Jesus says. They're weak. And one time, Jesus even describes Peter as Satan, of course.

[3:18] The point is, those first followers, just like us, were sinful and very slow as well. Now, of course, you might hope that after three years with Jesus, the disciples have made some improvement.

That they would finally have at least some insight into their own weaknesses. But you know what? I don't think they even managed that. I don't think anything prepared the disciples for Jesus' very blunt prediction about them in the passage that's been read this morning.

Look at verse 27. You will all fall away, Jesus said to them. For it is written, I will strike the shepherd and the sheep will be scattered.

You will all fall away. What a slap in the face for these disciples who've been following Jesus for three years.

Gee, thanks, Jesus, for the pep talk. Mind you, I bet all of them could picture some of the other disciples failing in some way.

[4:31] Remember how James and John messed up big time in chapter 10? And the others all responded with self-righteous indignation. So, yeah, some of them might be thinking, oh, okay, yeah, I think Jesus is talking about James and John.

Or perhaps some of them thought Jesus was talking about Peter. I mean, he has shown himself to be able to put his foot in his mouth more than once in this gospel.

Perhaps Jesus is saying Peter will fall away. But no, Jesus said you will all fall away. Seriously? All of them? And then to really rub it in, Jesus makes it clear that this isn't just some kind of gut feeling. It's not just some intuition.

No, actually, what Jesus is talking about is something that has been prophesied. The writing is on the wall, so to speak. You see, as Jesus carries on speaking in verse 27, he starts quoting an ancient prophecy from a holy prophet called Zechariah.

[5:41] And he lived 500 years earlier. And Jesus says Zechariah's ancient prophecy, which was well known to all the Jews, of course, was actually written about him, Jesus, and his disciples.

Jesus is the shepherd who will be struck by the leaders of the Jews and crucified by the Romans. And his disciples are the sheep.

And they will run away. They will all be scared. They will abandon their shepherd and they will be scattered. In other words, Jesus is saying that their failure, it's written in the stars, failure is their fate.

And if you think about that, if you think about the fact that Jesus said that and knew that, there's something very amazing about that. It's not amazing that the disciples were going to fail Jesus, but it's amazing that Jesus knew that his disciples were going to fail him.

Amazing in the sense that he knew that, and yet he was the one who handpicked them anyway. He was the one who called them to follow him.

[6:54] Anyway. He was the one who trained them anyway. He was the one who gave three years of his life to them anyway. Their future was foretold.

Their failure was foreseen. And Jesus just stuck with them anyway. I think that's amazing. And if Jesus knew their future and he foresaw their failure, well, surely he can see our future too.

And he can foresee our failures too. But he still sticks with us. And he does the same for you. He does the same for me.

Could you think of a better teacher or master or friend than Jesus? As I told you many years ago, I fancied myself as a guitar player.

Thought that I could learn the guitar. Now, imagine if I was to transport myself back to that time as a teenager. Imagine if I had persuaded someone then to give me free guitar lessons so that I didn't give up so easily.

[8:02] But then imagine if that teacher had the ability to see the future. So that before we started those free guitar lessons, the teacher could even see me in 2026.

And here I am. I don't own a guitar anymore. And I can't play more than three chords. Do you think that teacher would still offer me those free guitar lessons?

Seeing the future. I think they'd be crazy if they did. But Jesus, so different. He cares about disciples who disappoint.

He cares about followers who fail. He cares about Christians who crumble. I just want to encourage you that Jesus is the best friend, the best teacher, the best master that you can ever have.

He doesn't despise us for our deficiencies. He still calls us to follow him despite our failures. Well, let's carry on with the story.

[9:08] The truth that Jesus has for his disciples, it hurts. Of course it does. Jesus has spoken a very harsh truth to his disciples and it falls on them like a ton of bricks.

Especially Peter, who despite messing things up pretty regularly, probably still has the highest view of himself. Listen to Peter in verse 29.

Peter declared, even if all fall away, I will not. Wow. Just wow. I told you he had a high view of himself. In fact, if you really think about what he's saying, he not only just has a very high view of himself, he has a very low view of everyone else.

Do you see that? He's basically saying, yeah, Jesus, I can see you might have a point about the 11. Let's divide them up again.

The 11. Yeah, yeah, yeah. I get your point. But me? No, no, no, no, no, no. You're wrong about me. I'm not like them. I'll never fail you like them.

[10:17] I'll never fall away. None of us like to think about failure. None of us like to admit that we have weaknesses, that we do make mistakes and we make them regularly.

None of us like to confess that we still sin sometimes. And so what do we do instead? Well, what have humans been doing from the beginning in the face of failure?

Might be helpful to refresh our memories for a minute. Do you remember what our ancient ancestors, Adam and Eve, did in the face of failure? Of course, on the other side of failure, when they had already committed it, after they first sinned in the Garden of Eden.

And how did they face up to failure? Well, why don't you have a look at Genesis 3, 7 to 13? Those are the verses that immediately follow Adam and Eve eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

Look it up. Read that passage again. Let's take five minutes to do that. Again, talk to the person next to you. I want you to find two or three things that Adam and Eve do in the face of failure.

[11:32] How do they respond? How do they face up to that? Okay, five minutes. Okay. Can you tell me something they did?

Hide? What else? Cover? Cover? Cover up? Cover themselves? Blame others? All right. That's a pretty good list already.

Yeah, they cover up. They hide from God. They, in a sense, deny their sin and deflect the blame. Aren't we just like our ancestors, Adam and Eve?

Isn't that what we do in the face of failure? We feel ashamed and we want to cover up. We want to hide. We want to hide from each other. We want to hide from God.

And once we're cornered, we deny our sin and we deflect the blame. Maybe right now you can think of something that actually you are ashamed of.

[12:38] And you've been covering up because you don't want anyone to think that you're that bad. Maybe you've also even managed to convince yourself that it isn't really that bad anyway. In a kind of a denial.

Covering up. Hiding. We're so silly, aren't we? God found Adam and Eve in the garden. Of course he did.

He saw through their excuses. He sees and knows everything. He knows us better than we know ourselves. When God called to the man, where are you? It wasn't because God couldn't find Adam. Actually, it was an invitation. It was an invitation to Adam to come into the light. Come out of the darkness. Come into the light. Confess.

Confess to the God who knew him better than he knew himself. Jesus knows us better than we know ourselves. Jesus knew Peter better than he knew himself.

[13:42] And so back to Mark 14. Jesus answered Peter in verse 30. He said, Truly, I tell you.

Jesus answered. Today, yes, tonight. Before the rooster crows twice. You yourself will disown me three times. That's painfully specific.

It's not just Jesus saying, Peter, look, I know you're a pretty nice guy, but I sense that you might do something a bit silly and you might regret it.

There wouldn't be anything very special about that kind of prediction. No, Jesus' prediction is very precise. He can predict the time. He can predict the situation.

He can predict the very specific sin that Peter is about to commit. How precise? How specific? Well, basically, Jesus is saying, in less than 24 hours, in the early hours of tomorrow morning, in fact, before the crack of dawn, when the rooster crows, you're going to have an opportunity to declare that you are a follower of Jesus.

[14:57] But in that moment, you're going to pretend you don't even know me. You're not going to do that once, Peter. In fact, you're not even going to do that twice.

Three times, very publicly, you're going to disown me. Yep, all of that is going to happen in the next few hours. Well, no matter how specific Jesus gets, Peter still can't accept it.

It's so hard for him to hear. And if we put ourselves in Peter's shoes for a minute, fair enough, he's followed Jesus for three years.

He has. He's stuck with Jesus. All of the disciples have followed Jesus for three years. Why would any of them give up on Jesus now? They do love Jesus, don't they?

Surely they would never do anything to really hurt Jesus. And so in verse 31, Peter reacts by just doubling down on his disbelief.

[16:03] But Peter insisted emphatically, even if I have to die with you, I will never disown you. And all the others said the same.

So first, there is failure foretold by Jesus. Well, more than that, failure has been finely spelled out in the fullest detail.

And then what? Then failure has been denied by his followers. Well, more than that, actually. Now failure has been denied repeatedly and emphatically.

So who's right? Jesus or the disciples? Who knows the disciples better? Jesus or themselves? Who knows you better? Jesus or yourselves? During this camp, I've loved getting the chance to at least get to know some of you and enjoyed being here with all of you, worshipping and worshipping Jesus.

[17:12] And it's been wonderful to see your love for Jesus as well. And I hope that through the preaching of God's word, you're more excited about following Jesus than perhaps you were just a couple of days ago. But let's not fool ourselves.

Yes, we might be enthusiastic about following Jesus and serving him today. But let's not fool ourselves into thinking we will always feel like this as we do right now.

Let's not fool ourselves into thinking that we'll always follow Jesus faithfully at every moment. Always make the right choices. Never buckle under pressure.

I'm sure you've been to enough church camps to know that church camps are that kind of mountaintop experience where everything feels great and you're all fired up again for Jesus. And it's a temporary high in the Christian life. It's easy to feel good when you're on the mountain with God's people. And it seems somehow from the mountain that you can see everything so much clearer now.

[18:17] And then you come down the mountain. And then it's back to real life. And then things get a bit tough again. And different voices come in and different messages are speaking to you.

And old temptations come back. And you start to feel torn in different directions. And then you feel a bit lazy to open your Bible. And following Jesus doesn't really feel like your number one goal anymore.

So with all the best intentions to leave here living for Jesus, maybe as soon as this week some of you are going to take a little tumble. Maybe you're going to do something that you actually really regret.

But guess what? Jesus knows it. And you don't need to pretend to God or to anyone in this room actually that you're superhuman. You don't need to deny it when you mess up.

You definitely don't want to hide from Jesus. In fact, you need to do the complete opposite. You need to go quickly to Jesus. Jesus is the only person who knows about your every failure.

[19:24] And that includes in the past, in the present, and in the future. And not only does he know about your every failure, but he still chooses to be merciful, to love you, to call you back to him again.

That's the amazing Jesus that we follow. There's no one like him. Failure foretold, failure denied, Peter is wrong, Jesus is right. And yet, even that denial by Peter, the fact that Peter is so stubborn, doesn't change anything for Jesus.

He still won't give up on Peter. And Jesus won't give up on us either. Of course, you might just say, oh, this is our camp speaker trying to be encouraging on the last day, trying to make us feel good about our failures before we leave.

Beyond my words, how can you be sure that Jesus won't give up on you? How can you know that your sins, your failures, aren't too much for Jesus to take?

Well, the answer comes in a little detail in the story that we haven't quite covered yet. We haven't really finished this story yet. You see, just after Jesus foretold the disciples' failure, he said something in verse 28.

[20:43] It's very important. But I don't think Peter heard it. And perhaps we didn't quite catch it either. Maybe we need to go back. Let's get into reverse gear.

Let's go back to verse 28. And you tell me, what did we miss in the story in verse 28? Well, let's listen again.

Verses 27 to 28. You will all fall away, Jesus told them, for it is written, I will strike the shepherd and the sheep will be scattered, but after I have risen, I will go ahead of you into Galilee.

Yes, failure is foretold. But failure is also overcome. Jesus is talking about a future after failure.

You see, even after all the disciples fall away, even after Jesus, their shepherd, is struck, he will meet them again in Galilee.

[21:43] And their story will not end in failure. In other words, after Jesus is arrested and the disciples will run away and Peter denies even knowing Jesus three times, and after Jesus is put on trial and executed on a cross and buried in a tomb, he will rise again and he will restore his disciples.

The prediction of Jesus' resurrection reminds us that there was always more to Jesus' death than simply being rejected by the Jewish leaders and being crucified by the Romans.

The words of Zechariah's prophecy are actually from God. I, God, will strike the shepherd. Jesus' death was perfectly planned by God.

It was a sacrifice for sins. And Jesus' resurrection was perfectly planned by God too so that we might have a new life, that we might have hope. Now thinking objectively for a minute, in the face of all this failure, Jesus rising from the dead, that's going to put Jesus in a very mighty position, isn't it? A mightily powerful position. I mean, imagine Jesus, a powerful Jesus resurrected, coming back from the dead and what he might do to all his enemies who just put him on the cross, but also what he might do to his very disappointing disciples when he comes back in power.

[23:15] Now that could be a terrifying thought. And yet, what is actually at the top of Jesus' to-do list after his resurrection? At the top of his list, it is to get his deeply disappointing disciples back together again.

Back to where they started in Galilee. He wants to forgive them and give them a future. He wants to reinstate them as his servants. He wants to continue changing them into his people who will sow his word around the world.

After all, the disciples aren't the only sinners who need to know that Jesus has died and risen again for them. They need to get that message out to the world because we all need to hear that. If anyone here is not yet a Christian, this is why we Christians love Jesus so much.

It's why we need Jesus so much. This is why we want you to know Jesus so much. Now finally, for everyone in this room who is a Christian, brothers and sisters, let me now make a prediction about your life.

Now I'm no prophet like Zechariah, but I am confident that I can make a prediction about every Christian in this room. The prediction is that everyone in this room will fail in some way at some point.

[24:33] I think I can make that prediction. You are going to let Jesus down in some way. You are going to make a wrong choice. You may not believe it right now, but Jesus knows. But I'm no help to you just by being able to make a prediction like that.

We need a promise as well. Not just a prediction, but a promise. And the promise is that with Jesus, there is a future after failure. That's the promise.

There is a future after failure. And how can I make that promise? I can make it because of Jesus' death and resurrection. Jesus' death was a sacrifice for our sins.

Jesus' resurrection was so that we might have new life and hope in him that failure would be overcome. When I was younger, I had a really hard time believing that my failures could be overcome, that my sins were perhaps not too much for Jesus to forgive.

I was very stuck on my sin. I was ashamed of myself as a teenager. Despite going to church every week, surely God must have been ashamed of me.

[25:43] How could God possibly love me? I couldn't feel his love. But one Bible verse eventually just blew me away. Changed my mind about God's love forever.

And I want to share that with you and I'm sure many of you would know this verse. Romans 5.8 but God demonstrates his own love for us in this. While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

That verse changed my mind about God forever because God's love for me, it doesn't depend on what I've done today. It doesn't depend on what I feel today.

It doesn't depend on me becoming a perfect person. No, God's love for me is grounded in something unchanging, something historical that happened 2,000 years ago.

And you know, nothing can change history. I can do many things in my life but I can't change history. I cannot change the thing that God's love is grounded in.

[26:54] Nothing can ever change the demonstration of God's love because Christ has already died for us. He's already been raised for us. And so future failure is already overcome and God's love for us is fixed forevermore.

Now for some this might raise a question or even a problem. Some might say that's it? So we just fail and Jesus forgives and so I can just do anything I like? Well that would be a problem, right? That attitude would make a mockery of Jesus' death on the cross and that's not our response to the cross. Yes we failed, yes Jesus forgives but then what?

We need a pathway and the pathway is this, we start again with Jesus. Just like the disciples are going to start again in Galilee with Jesus, we also start again after failure.

The way you continue in the Christian life is the same way you started in the Christian life.

Remember what Jesus proclaimed or how he proclaimed the good news about the kingdom of God in chapter 1?

[28:08] What must people do? The time has come, the kingdom of God has come near, repent and believe the good news.

You see that's not just the right place to start the Christian life, that's the way to continue in the Christian life. It's the way to restart walking with Jesus.

We fail, we like to deny it, Jesus knows it and yet amazingly, graciously, Jesus has overcome all our failures by his death and resurrection. He died for our sins, he was raised to give us new life and hope, he promises us there's always a future after failure, we just have to start again repent, believe the good news and follow Jesus.

Let me finish with an illustration, a personal story about one of my own failures.

Not something I'm proud to share with you this morning, but I hope that somehow it might be helpful, it might encourage you. This was more than 10 years ago before I was a pastor, when I was actually an English teacher at that time and I'm happy to say I think I had a pretty good reputation in my school, I was known as a Christian and I think one of the things that really made me stand out among my colleagues was that I didn't swear, I was working with lots of expats and swearing was just part of the language, the lingo every day, but I was careful not to do that, I was careful not to gossip or attack people behind their backs, which was pretty common in the office.

[29:58] And then one day, I sent an email to all my colleagues, sharing some important information with all the teachers, something which I did fairly regularly, but one day, on that day, I just thought I'd be a little bit funny.

I suppose I just want people to kind of like me and think I'm a bit funny. Well, that was a problem that day, because my joke in that email, it was just a little bit crude, it was a bit crass, it was not respectful of someone in the office, actually.

But never mind, I thought it was quite funny, pretty mild really, compared to what all my colleagues are doing and saying, everything, and I clicked send, didn't think about it anymore.

Now, what do you think happened? Well, pretty much nothing happened, to be honest, because, as I say, that kind of rude or crude humour, that was nothing, really, compared to what was usually shared in the office.

Most of my colleagues didn't bat an eyelid. But, I did have this one colleague, an older American lady, a devoutly religious lady, but not a Christian.

[31:22] She was a convert to Islam. And after my email, she came straight up to me, and she personally said to me, Chris, I'm very disappointed with your email.

I expected so much better of you as a Christian. I can still picture her saying those things, and I can still feel the sting of her rebuke.

That was a slap in the face for me. I mean, I wanted to be a witness to my colleagues. I wanted to be a witness to this woman. And in the end, she had to be the one to rebuke me for my sin.

How utterly shameful. I just felt like I'd let Christ down. It's as if I just denied my entire faith. Have you sinned like that as a Christian?

Have you let Christ down like that? That failure could have crushed me. I might have felt like never trying to witness for Christ again.

[32:31] I'd be such a hypocrite. I might have just buried my faith and hidden it away from everyone. That would have been a lot easier. failure. But because of Jesus' death and resurrection, I knew there is a future after failure.

Not that we deserve it, but there is. And yes, I had to admit to that American colleague, she was right. I was wrong.

wrong. I had to thank her for pointing that out. I had to confess to God that I was wrong in my actions, that I had dishonored the name of Christ. I had to ask for forgiveness.

And I had to repent. And what was repentance in this case? It was turning my back on just even mildly rude or crude humor.

It was something that I couldn't even begin to entertain in my mind as something that might be funny to share with my colleagues. It was to recommit myself to doing and saying things that would only honor Christ.

[33:41] And then I had to believe the good news that Jesus had paid. It's not supposed to look like that. What is it?

I suppose that could be a cross and then an empty tomb. Yeah? But it's not meant to look like that. But I had to believe the good news and I did believe the good news that Jesus had died for my sins. Not in part but in full. I had to believe that God's Holy Spirit wasn't going to give up on me, give up changing me, that he would continue to dwell in me, that I could carry on as a witness for Jesus instead of being defined by failure.

And I'm glad to say that God after that still gave me some opportunities to witness in a meaningful way to my colleagues. Let's not hide or deny or cover up our failures now or in the future.

Let's confess. Let's confess quickly. Let's turn from our sins and turn back to Jesus quickly. Let's trust in his love all over again.

[34:51] rather than us trying to cover up our shame like Adam and Eve tried to do. Thank God for Jesus who covers it for us. And you know what?

I'm looking forward to meeting all of you in heaven one day where we will get to share our stories, where we'll get to hear of how each of us kept following Jesus even after our failures, how our sins were many but his mercy was more, how the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ overcame our failures and how he kept working through us imperfect people to the glory of his name.

Amen? Amen. Let's pray. Heavenly Father, what can we do but confess our weaknesses, our failures, our lack of courage, our mistakes, our bold faced sins and even our denials in the face of failure?

we can't pretend, not before you. You know all things, you know us completely but thank you so much that despite that you still love us, that you still sent your son Jesus knowing all things that would happen even in the future, that Jesus still went to the cross to pay for our sins and that you raised your son Jesus again so that we might have a future after failure.

Thank you that we can have that confidence as followers of Jesus. Confidence that doesn't depend on ourselves, that depends instead on the cross and on the resurrection of Jesus.

[37:06] Jesus. So Lord help us and empower us as we go from this camp to continue as followers of Jesus, as witnesses to the good news, confident that even when we fail and we sin, we can come back to you and you will pick us up and lead us on.

Thank you for your grace and your mercy. In Jesus name, Amen.