

THINGS THAT GO BUMP IN THE MIND: FACING THE MONSTERS THAT COME CALLING DAY AND NIGHT

Chapter 2

When the company you started files for Chapter 11: Living in hope despite your failure

(Revised 8/26/05)

The pages of history are filled with failures, including some that are rather amusing. Erecting the very latest equipment, Texaco workmen set about drilling for oil at Lake Peigneur in Louisiana during November 1980. After only a few hours drilling they sat back expecting oil to shoot up. Instead, however, they watched a whirlpool form, sucking down not only the entire 1,300-acre lake, but also five houses, nine barges, eight tug boats, two oil-rigs, a mobile home, most of a botanical garden and ten per cent of nearby Jefferson Island, leaving a half-mile-wide crater. No one told them that there was an abandoned salt mine underneath.¹

Perhaps the prize for the most useless weapon of all time goes to the Russian military strategists who invented the “dog mine.” The plan was to train the dogs to associate food with the undersides of tanks, in the hope that they would run hungrily beneath advancing Panzer divisions. Bombs were then strapped to the dogs’ backs, which endangered the dogs to the point where no insurance company would look at them.

Unfortunately, the dogs associated food solely with Russian tanks. The plan was begun the first day of the Russian involvement in World War II . . . and abandoned on day two. The dogs with bombs on their back forced an entire Soviet division to retreat.²

The story is told of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, the creator of Sherlock Holmes, and how he played a practical joke on some friends. As the story goes, he sent an anonymous telegram to each of twelve friends, all men of great virtue and considerable prestige and position in society. The message simply said: “Flee at once . . . all is discovered.” Within twenty-four hours, all twelve had left the country.³

No doubt there is some playful exaggeration here, but the point is that each one of us can identify with failure. Each person has at least one skeleton in their closet. However, very few will admit to them. John F. Kennedy once said, “Success has many fathers, but failure is an orphan; no one wants to claim it.”⁴

One of the monsters that visits me regularly whispers, “One mistake is all you get and you already made yours. You’re a failure and always will be. If people only knew what you did, they would never trust you again. Your mistake has permanently disqualified you from ever serving in the future.”

If I received Sir Arthur Conan Doyle’s telegram, I would have been on the first bus out of town. But I’m also sure I would have company.

Many of us operate from the unspoken belief or philosophy that failure is fatal. On the front end, that philosophy hinders us from taking risks. When we lose our freedom to fail, we always look for the safe, sure thing. On the other end, that belief causes us to act as if that failure disqualifies us from ever trying again. “I’m a loser, I always have been and always will be.”

Many of us are undoubtedly visited by the same monster and haunted by the same thought, “Am I a failure? Have my mistakes permanently disqualified me?” After the monster delivers his message and leaves, we need a large dose of hope and forgiveness.

We need someone to tell us that God can transform a horrible failure into a hopeful future.

Several years ago, my wife and I endured the aftermath of a painful defeat.⁵ It was an intense, white-knuckle ride on an emotional roller coaster. We went from high hopes to deep despair and back and forth again, holding our breath and hanging on for dear life. In the midst of all of this, a friend of ours called to say that she was praying that God would give me hope. I politely listened while she read Hosea 2:14-15.

“Therefore I am now going to allure her; I will lead her into the desert and speak tenderly to her. There I will give her back her vineyards, and will make the Valley of Achor a door of hope. There she will sing as in the days of her youth, as in the day she came up out of Egypt.”

I politely thanked our friend and promptly dismissed her encouragement—it all sounded like a cliché. Later, however, the phrase, “I . . . will make the Valley of Achor a door of hope” intrigued me. Where was the Valley of Achor? Why was it so important? What took place there? Why did it need to be transformed? If God was going to make it a door of hope, does that mean that something disastrous occurred there?

As I sat down with my concordance, I discovered that the Valley of Achor appeared two other times in Scripture. In Joshua 7, it is anything but a door of hope.

In Joshua 7, the Valley of Achor looms as a blemish on the service record of General Joshua. In chapters 1 - 6 of his book, Joshua’s stock as a leader climbed dramatically. There is the miraculous crossing of the Jordan River and the establishment of the stones of remembrance in chapter 4. Chapters 5 and 6 detailed the fall of Jericho.

Israel was riding the crest of the wave of victorious faith. It appeared that Israel had the Midas touch, everything they touched turned to gold.

Joshua 7:1 begins with an editorial comment about the tarnished character of Achan following the conquering of Jericho. “But the Israelites acted unfaithfully in regard to the devoted things; Achan son of Carmi, the son of Zimri, the son Zerah, of the tribe of Judah, took some of them. So the Lord’s anger burned against Israel”

Verse 21, which records Achan’s confession, supplies more of the details. “When I saw in the plunder a beautiful robe from Babylonia, two hundred shekels of silver and a wedge of gold weighing fifty shekels, I coveted them and took them. They are hidden in the ground inside my tent, with the silver underneath.”

Achan was part of the attack force that swept across the fallen walls of Jericho, conquered the people, collected the booty for the Lord’s treasury, and burnt the city. He was fully aware that all the spoils were consecrated to God and banned from personal possession (6:18-19), but he simply could not resist. When the smoke and the confusion was the thickest, he selected some gold and silver and a beautiful Babylonian coat.

During the summer, I enjoy riding my ten-speed bicycle. Over the years, I have had a variety of flat tires. One time I took my bike to a gas station in order to fill up the tires and had one of them explode in my face because the force of the air pressure going into the tire was more than the inner tubes could handle. I have accidentally ridden over a nail or a thorn and had the tire suddenly flatten under my weight. More often, however, is the type where I go out one morning to ride and discover that the tire is flat because the air slowly leaked out—maybe it was through a pin-sized hole or simply a weakened area in the tire wall.

Failure like Achan's is seldom a blowout. It is usually a slow leak over a period of time. A compromise in values here, a little "white" lie there, fudging on my expense report, having my secretary or my children tell someone on the phone that I'm not in, all weaken the walls of my character over a period of time. Then when temptation comes, I give in and I fall. It may appear that I had a blowout, but the reality is that the air began leaking out long ago. The walls were simply too thin to withstand any more pressure from temptation.

We need to be wary of influences that will weaken the walls of our lives. Achan was not motivated out of poverty. The later listing of his cattle and livestock (7:24) indicates he was already wealthy. He wanted luxury, affluence, and more. Those same desires stretch the walls of our hearts and cause us to sacrifice our values, ethics, and families in order to have the latest and the best of everything.

An example of what can happen when the walls of our lives are weakened is what took place in Sally and Jeff's marriage. Sally was reluctant to admit that she was hooked on a steady diet of soap operas and romance novels that she inhaled daily. They created the illusion of the perfect lover who was far more sensitive and caring than her husband. Unable to get the communication and attention she desperately craved, she created a fantasy world. Unfortunately, Jeff was too busy to notice. He was either working overtime, or when he wasn't working, he was off playing tennis, softball, or golf with his buddies. All of these other interests gradually tugged his heart away from his home. Like a furnace whose pilot light has gone out, their love grew cold. While they appeared happily married on the outside, they were merely two people living in the same house.

Instead of a vital relationship, they were suffering through an emotional divorce. Failing to guard their hearts, they faced consequences they never desired.

Achan's choice brought disastrous consequences. Following their great victory at Jericho, the army of Israel was routed at Ai. As a result of the defeat, the people were depressed and discouraged. Their hearts melted (7:5) and they began to doubt and question God (7:7). They were ready to give up and go home.

God interrupted Joshua's lament to explain to him that Israel's defeat was due to deceit.

The Lord said to Joshua, "Stand up! What are you doing down on your face? Israel has sinned; they have violated my covenant, which I commanded them to keep. They have taken some of the devoted things; they have stolen, they have lied, they have put them with their own possessions. That is why the Israelites cannot stand against their enemies; they turn their backs and run because they have been made liable to destruction. I will not be with you anymore unless you destroy whatever among you is devoted to destruction" (7:10-12).

God held the nation corporately responsible for the sin of one man and his family. 36 valiant warriors died as the result of his deceit. God said that he would withhold his presence until they dealt with the sin in their midst. We need to recognize that there may be corporate consequences for individual iniquity.

As individuals and as a church, we need to confess and seek forgiveness for the sins of those in our fellowship, our city, our state, and our nation. Not only do we need to hold each other accountable, we also need to take personal and corporate responsibility for what each other does.

In verses 13 - 19, God used an elaborate method of isolating Achan and confronting him with his sin. Caught and exposed, he confessed in verse 20, “It is true! I have sinned against the Lord.”

In verses 24 - 26, Achan received the consequences of his choice.

Then Joshua, together with all Israel, took Achan son of Zerah, the silver, the robe, the gold wedge, his sons and daughters, his cattle, donkeys and sheep, his tent and all that he had, to the Valley of Achor. Joshua said, “Why have you brought this trouble on us? The Lord will bring trouble on you today.” Then all Israel stoned him, and after they had stoned the rest, they burned them. Over Achan they heaped up a large pile of rocks, which remains to this day. Then the Lord turned from his fierce anger. Therefore that place has been called the Valley of Achor ever since.

Israel buried a moral failure under a pile of rocks. They attempted to cover it up and forget their sin. But that sense of defeat and discouragement did not go away. The Valley of Achor became known as a place of trouble, a visual reminder of their moral failure. Not only was there a pile of rocks to remind them, (and it would have been pretty large in order to cover up all the people, cattle, tents, livestock, and possessions) but also the name of the place reminded them what happened every time they mentioned it.

Achor literally means disturbance or trouble. It is a play on words since it is another form of Achan’s name. As the *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* explains, the word “reflects the social dimension of an individual’s action. A person’s negative action (this word always has a negative concept) has a harmful influence not only on himself, but also upon others. A person can ‘trouble’ another person or the entire

nation, bringing either man's or God's judgment upon others."⁶ From that point on, it was known as the Valley of Trouble, the Valley of Achor.

I would venture to guess that each one of us knows the exact location of a pile of rocks where we have buried a mistake or a failure or a time of trouble. Some of us have so many skeletons in our closets that the hinges are bulging.

You may have stolen something and told some lies to cover it up. Perhaps you had an affair, became pregnant when you weren't married, or had an abortion. Maybe it's a drinking problem or drugs or an addiction to pornography, or you abused someone or were abused yourself.

Maybe your children have rebelled and rejected your values and faith. You're embarrassed to show your face at church because you don't know how to answer the same questions each week. Maybe it's a bitter divorce, or perhaps you said some things to your parents, spouse, children, or a friend that you now regret, now you're estranged and you don't know how to tear down the walls.

Perhaps you made some poor investments and your husband or wife has never let you forget it. Maybe you gambled on investing your retirement funds in a pyramid scheme that ultimately backfired on you. Perhaps you invested heavily in a dot.com startup that went bust and you lost everything.

Whatever it may be, you confessed it to God and made restitution, but there's still a pile of rocks that reminds you of your failure. You've burned the map and wiped away any traces of the past, but the location is etched indelibly in your mind. That pile of rocks haunts you. "If people ever discovered the truth . . ." haunts your waking moments.

What started out as a few pebbles soon becomes a monument to futility. That sense of failure cripples you emotionally. In your mind, the monsters whisper, “God can never forgive you completely, and even if he did, he would never forget. And maybe in the miracle that *he* could forget, *you* never can.” The monsters make sure that you are constantly haunted and hounded by the memory. “You’ll always be a failure,” the monsters remind you bitterly.

At times like this, we agree with Chuck Swindoll who said, “It seems as if God has forever sealed shut the storm windows and drawn the drapes on hope and happiness.”⁷ That’s exactly how you feel.

That loss of hope cripples us more than any other. As a result, we are ready to run up a white flag, or to abandon ship. There is no point in going further, the monsters whisper. “Once a loser, always a loser.” In his book, *Man’s Search for Meaning*, Victor Frankl, successor of Sigmund Freud at Vienna, argued that the “loss of hope and courage can have a deadly effect on man.” As a result of his experiences in a Nazi concentration camp, Frankl contended that when a man no longer possesses a motive for living, no future to look toward, he curls up in a corner and dies.⁸ As Swindoll points out, “Take away from us our wealth and we are hindered. Take our health and we are handicapped. Take away our purpose and we are slowed, temporarily confused. But take away our hope and we are plunged into deepest darkness . . . stopped dead in our tracks, paralyzed. Wondering, ‘Why?’ Asking, ‘How much longer? Will this cold, dark winter ever end? Does He know where I am?’”⁹

At times like this, we desperately need hope. We need to be reassured that we can go on, that failure is not fatal. We need to know, not only that God forgives, but that he can also give us a new beginning.

The 2000 box office hit, “The Legend of Bagger Vance,” provides an illustration of how others can help us regain our hope. The movie tells the story of Rannulph Junuh, the best amateur golfer in the Southeast during the 1910s. Known for his near perfect game, Junuh also won the heart of Adele Invergordon, the daughter of the richest man in Savannah, Georgia.

Unfortunately, WWI came along and after enlisting and suffering the horrors of war, Junuh returned a broken man, hoping to forget and be forgotten. As the years went by, Adele got on with her life, but when the Great Depression hits and her distraught father commits suicide over the failure of his newly opened, oceanfront golf resort, the tenacious young woman must figure out what to do with the debt he also left her.

Realizing she has to draw attention to the resort, Adele decides to sell everything so that she can put together a ten thousand dollar exhibition match featuring golf’s two best players, Walter Hagen and Bobby Jones. Although she convinces the two of them to appear, the Savannah locals won’t give their approval for her plan unless they can get a local player to participate.

When they can’t think of anyone, ten-year-old Hardy Greaves, a golf fanatic, suggests that Junuh could give them a run for the money, despite the fact that he only knows of the former golfer’s game through his father’s stories. Rushing off to tell Junuh of the good news, Hardy finds a disillusioned young man who’s more interested in drinking and playing poker than returning to the game.

Nevertheless, and due to some prodding from Hardy and Adele—with whom he never resolved the status of their former relationship—Junuh decides one night to see if he's really lost his swing. While doing so, he meets Bagger Vance, an amiable but obviously poor black man who literally walks out of the darkness and into Junuh's life.

Filled with down-home, sage advice and philosophical sayings, Bagger offers to be Junuh's caddie and subtly convinces the former golfer that he can not only return to the game, but that he can also compete against Hagen and Jones. As the two-day, 72-hole exhibition begins, Junuh—with the help of Bagger—tries to get both his game and his life back in order.

There are times in our lives when God may bring a "Bagger Vance" along to encourage us and help us to regain our hope. That's what God did for the nation of Israel through the prophet Isaiah.

Fast forward 700 years to the Book of Isaiah where God promised he would restore the Jews back to the Promised Land following the Babylonian exile. When that restoration took place, the Valley of Achor would take on a whole new meaning.

Isaiah 65:10 explains that the Valley of Achor would become a place of rest. "Sharon will become a pasture for flocks, and the Valley of Achor a resting place for herds, for my people who seek me." What a great irony that a valley filled with rocks would become a place where the weary went to rest. God, in his grace, can transform a rocky path into a resting place.

During the 90's, I made several trips to Russia and Ukraine to participate in various ministry opportunities. As part of my background reading and preparation, I learned that during the October Revolution in 1917, many of the churches were

confiscated when the communists took over. They were turned into factories and storage barns. But in the years under Glasnost and Perestroika, many of them have been emptied and returned to the people as a place of worship.

In his book, *Praying with the KGB*, Philip Yancey described his visit to the Zagorsk Prison, one of the oldest and worst in Russia. In 1989, the warden authorized monks from the nearby monastery to rebuild the chapel in the basement. It took many hours to remove a seventy-year accumulation of filth, but it was finally transformed. Located at the lowest subterranean level, it was an oasis of beauty in an otherwise grim dungeon.¹⁰

What was once a sign of trouble has been transformed into a site of truth. A rocky path had become a resting place.

God desires to perform that same transformation in our lives. In Matthew 11:28 Jesus stated, “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.” Jesus wants to take away our haunting memories and our heavy load of guilt so that we might enjoy his rest.

In addition to being a place of rest, the Valley of Achor would become a door of hope. That’s the promise of Hosea 2:14-15.

“Therefore I am now going to allure her; I will lead her into the desert and speak tenderly to her. There I will give her back her vineyards, and will make the Valley of Achor a door of hope. There she will sing as in the days of her youth, as in the day she came up out of Egypt.”

In verse 14, God initiated the process. The word, “allure,” indicates that God uses tender, seductive speech to woo or draw the nation of Israel back to himself. In spite of

the fact that she was unfaithful, he lovingly brings her back to a place of honor and restores their relationship. He says that he will transform her old memories of horror into new ones of hope. God promised that the Valley of Achor, a visual reminder of failure, disturbance, and trouble, would become a symbol of a fresh start. A pile of rocks marking the grave of failure would become the cornerstone of a door of new opportunity.

I don't know about you, but I need someone to tell me that the monsters are wrong. Failure is not fatal. Stop believing that it is. The mindset that failure is fatal, that there is no forgiveness, that God never forgets is a lie straight from the pit. Satan wants to fool us into believing that we're washed up and disqualified, that "once a failure, always a failure." The truth is that God offers forgiveness and a fresh start. Scripture is replete with examples of men and women who failed miserably and yet God still used them in ministry.

Abraham, founder of Israel and tagged "the friend of God," was once a worshiper of idols. Joseph had a prison record but later became prime minister of Egypt. Moses was a murderer, but later became the one who delivered his nation from the slavery of Pharaoh. Jephthah was an illegitimate child who ran around with a tough bunch of hoods before he was chosen by God to become his personal representative. Rahab was a harlot in the streets of Jericho but was later used in such a mighty way that God enlisted her among the members of his hall of fame in Hebrews 11.

Still unconvinced? There's more. Eli and Samuel were both poor, inconsistent fathers, but proved to be strong men in God's hand regardless. Jonah and John Mark were missionaries who ran away from hardship like cowards but were ever so profitable later on. Peter openly denied the Lord and cursed him, only to return and become God's

choicest spokesman among the early years of the infant church. Paul was so hard and vicious in his early life that the disciples and apostles refused to believe he'd actually become a Christian . . . but you know how greatly God used him. We could go on and on. The files of heaven are filled with stories of redeemed, refitted renegades and rebels.¹¹

God can still perform that same act of metamorphosis in our lives today. God can take what appears to us as a pile of rocks and make it a place of rest and renewal. He can change a signpost of failure into a signature of a hopeful future. He can transform our defeat and discouragement into a door of hope.

God has worked that same miracle in my own life. I mentioned in chapter one having been fired from a previous church. In the months that followed, we struggled emotionally and asked God many times what he was doing in our lives. After resigning in July, I sent out dozens of resumes. We prayed that a new ministry would open up by October 1. Instead, the two most promising churches fell through on the same day in late October. Discouraged and dejected, I began to wonder if God was leading me away from ministry. Thinking that a real possibility, I investigated the option of obtaining a teaching credential and becoming an elementary school teacher.

Because the winter is no time to sell a home in the Midwest, we listed our home in late September, fully expecting that by the time it sold, I would have a new job and a place to go. The house sold in 10 days and we had nowhere to go. The last thing I ever wanted to do was move back in with my folks. And yet, on Thanksgiving weekend, we loaded up the moving van and headed for Southern California. "At least, we'll be with family for the holidays," we told ourselves dejectedly.

One week later on December 1, we unloaded all our belongings at my mother's house. I was as low as I've ever been, having to reach up on my tiptoes just to touch bottom. I distinctly remember telling my wife, "I am not a loser. But I sure feel like one right now. I might as well tattoo a big 'L' on my forehead."

We felt a bit like "Chippie" the parakeet whose owner decided to clean its cage.¹² She inserted a vacuum cleaner wand into the cage in order to vacuum up the mess. In the midst of the job, the phone rang. In the course of the conversation, she heard a dull thud and looked over at the cage. Sure enough, Chippie was missing. She quickly turned off the vacuum cleaner, undid the bag, and discovered the parakeet covered with soot and dirt, but still alive. She placed him under the faucet, washed him off, and dried him with a blow dryer. Finally, she called the vet and complained that Chippie just stares a lot and doesn't sing as much. We sort of felt that way, too—sucked out, washed up, and blown away.

Prior to leaving the Midwest, I had a phone interview with the search committee at a church in Seattle, Washington. Being discouraged and depressed, we did not think they would be interested. As a result, I felt a great freedom to just be myself and consequently, it was the best interview I've ever had. Our reasoning was, "they're not going to like me anyway, and besides, I've got other options."

Four hours after unloading the truck and telling my wife I felt like a loser, I received a call from the search committee chairman, saying that the church wanted me to candidate after the first of the year. The rest is ecclesiastical history. I served at the church for 14 years.

Rather than cripple us forever, failure should challenge us to learn and to grow. Instead of acting as a roadblock to stop our progress, we should treat it as a hurdle that may slow us down but that we stretch to get over.

In August 1978, the first successful transatlantic balloon flight became a reality when Double Eagle II touched ground in a barley field in the small village of Miserey, France. But success in this accomplishment did not come easy. During the years from 1873 through 1978, thirteen attempts had been made—all ending in failure. After an unsuccessful attempt in 1977, in which Double Eagle ended up in Iceland, Double Eagle II was successful in making that historic six-day trip from Presque Isle, Maine, to Miserey, France.

What made the difference between the unsuccessful trip and the successful one? One difference was the addition of another man. A second difference was experience. Maxie Anderson, one of the crew, put it this way, “I don’t think that you can fly the Atlantic without experience, and that’s one reason it hadn’t been flown before. Success in any venture is just the intelligent application of failure.”¹³

God offers to transform our defeat and discouragement into a door of hope. He wants to take what for us is a sign of trouble and judgment and turn it into a symbol of a new opportunity for trust, growth, and service. God does not condemn us to be reminded of our failures. Instead, he wants to erect over them a gravestone with one word on it, “FORGIVEN.”

Accept his offer of forgiveness, hope, and a fresh start. Tell the monsters they can have the night off.

WHEN YOU FEEL LIKE A FAILURE,

1. Remember that failure is not fatal.
2. Remind yourself that God can turn what, for you, is a sign of failure, into a new opportunity for him to work in your life.

QUESTIONS TO HELP YOU TURN ON THE NIGHT LIGHT

1. Can you think of a time in your life where you experienced failure? What took place? How did you feel? What helped you to get over it?
2. When you are discouraged, what helps you to regain hope?
3. During times when you are down, what passages of Scripture do you turn to for comfort? How have they helped you?
4. Has God ever brought a “Bagger Vance” into your life? What did they do or say to encourage you?
5. Who are the most hope-filled people that you know of? Why not set a time and ask them to share their stories with you and what causes them to be hopeful?

¹ Pile, S. (1988). *Cannibals in the Cafeteria and other Fabulous Failures*. New York: Harper & Row, p. 18.

² Adapted from Swindoll, C. R. (1983). *Growing strong in the seasons of life*. Portland, OR: Multnomah Press, p. 29-30.

³ Cited in Hughes, R. K. (1991). *James: Faith that works*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, p. 160.

⁴ Green, M.P. (Ed.). (1989). *Illustrations for biblical preaching*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, p. 132, #443.

⁵ See chapter one for the story of our exile.

⁶ Harris, R. L., Archer, G. L., Waltke, B. K. (Eds.). (1980). "'akor." In *Theological wordbook of the Old Testament*. Chicago, IL: Moody Press, vol. 2, p. 666.

⁷ Swindoll, C. R. (1985). *Come before winter . . . and share my hope*. Portland, OR: Multnomah Press, p. 14.

⁸ Cited in Green, p. 194, # 679.

⁹ Ibid., p. 228.

¹⁰ Yancey, P. (1992). *Praying with the KGB*. Portland, OR: Multnomah Press, p. 58.

¹¹ Swindoll. *Growing strong . . .* p. 252-3.

¹² This story is attributed to Max Lucado, though I don't know which book it is from.

¹³ Cited in Green, p. 363, # 1338. (from *National Geographic*, December 1978, pp. 858-882).