

When You Feel Like a Failure

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The pages of history are filled with failures, including some that are rather amusing. There are the Texaco workmen who set about drilling for oil at Lake Peigneur in Louisiana. Instead of finding oil, they drilled into an abandoned salt mine underneath and drained the entire 1,300-acre lake.

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 12 friends, all men of great virtue and considerable prestige and position in society. The message simply said, "Flee at once...all is discovered." Within 24 hours, all 12 had left the country.

Perhaps there is some playful exaggeration here, but the point is that we all can identify with failure. Each one of us has at least one skeleton in the closet. The problem is that many of us operate from the unspoken belief that failure is fatal. On the front end, that philosophy hinders us from taking risks. On the other end, that belief causes us to act as if failure disqualifies us from ever trying again.

Several years ago, the first church I pastored asked for my resignation. While I had not done anything wrong, neither had I done enough right, and the church decided to make a change. The experience was an intense, white-knuckle ride on an emotional roller coaster.

As my wife and I plunged downward from hope to despair, a friend of ours called to say that she was praying that God would give us hope. I 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? What took place there, and why did it need to be transformed?

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

Joshua 7:1 begins with an editorial comment about the tarnished character of Achan following the conquering of Jericho. Achan was part of the attack force which swept across the fallen walls of Jericho, conquered the people, collected the booty for the Lord's treasury, and burned the city. He was fully aware that all the spoil was consecrated to God and banned from personal possession (6:18–19), but he simply could not resist. When the smoke and confusion were thickest, he selected some gold and silver and a beautiful Babylonian coat.

Achan's choice brought disastrous consequences. Following their great victory at Jericho, 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 (v. 7). They were ready to give up.

God interrupted Joshua's lament to explain to him that Israel's defeat was due to deceit (7:10–12). Using an elaborate method, God guided Joshua in isolating Achan and confronting him with his sin (vv. 13–19). Caught and exposed, Achan confessed, "It is true! I have sinned against the LORD, the God of Israel" (v. 20).

Achan received the consequences of his choice: stoning. "Joshua said, 'Why have you brought this trouble on us? The LORD will bring trouble on you today.' Then all Israel stoned him.... Over Achan they heaped up a large pile of rocks, which remains to this day.... Therefore that place has been called the Valley of Achor ever since" (7:25–26).

Although Israel buried a moral failure, their sense of defeat would not go away. Not only was there a pile of rocks (and it would have been quite large in order to cover up all the people, cattle, tents, livestock, and possessions), 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.

I would guess that each one of us knows the exact location where we buried a mistake or a failure. Maybe you stole something and told a lie 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 it's a bitter divorce, or perhaps you said some things to your parents, spouse, children, or a friend, and now you're estranged. Whatever it may be, you confessed it to God and made restitution, but a pile of rocks still 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. "If people ever discovered the truth..." haunts your waking moments.

What began as a few pebbles soon becomes a monument to futility. In your mind, God can never forgive you completely, and even if He did, He would never forget. And maybe if miraculously *He* could forget, *you* never can. "Once a loser, always a loser," you remind yourself bitterly.

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

Fast forward 700 years from Joshua's day to the Book of Isaiah, where God promised to 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.

In addition to a place of rest, God promised in Hosea 2:14–15 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 new opportunity.

God worked that miracle in my own life. In the months that followed my being let go from the church, my wife and I struggled emotionally and asked God repeatedly what He was doing in our lives. After resigning in July, I sent out dozens of résumés. We prayed that a new ministry would open up by October 1. Instead, the two most promising opportunities fell through on the same day in late October. Discouraged and dejected, I began to wonder if God was leading me away from vocational ministry.

Because the winter is a poor time to try 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. 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 parents. 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.

One week later, we unloaded all our belongings at my mother's house. I distinctly remember telling my wife, "I am not a loser. But I sure feel like one right now."

Prior to leaving the Midwest, I had a phone interview with the search committee at a church in Washington. Being discouraged and depressed, I thought, "they're probably not going to like me anyway, and besides, I've got other options." As a result, I felt great freedom to be myself.

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 church later called me to be pastor.

Rather than cripple us forever, failure should challenge us to learn and to grow.

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 successfully made 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. Crew member Maxie Anderson put it this way, "I don't think 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."

God offers to transform our discouragement and defeats 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 a fresh start. God does not condemn us to be reminded of our failures. Instead, He wants to erect over them a gravestone, engraved with one word: "FORGIVEN."