

Sermon preached at Faith Presbyterian Church, Springfield, Virginia,
on Sunday, September 22, 1991, by the Rev. W. Graham Smith, D.D.

JOB 17:11

“My days have passed, my plans are shattered,
and so are the desires of my heart.”

ENCOURAGING WORDS FROM GOD’S WORD

(3) IT’S NEVER TOO LATE TO START OVER!

In our series so far, we have looked at how to deal with delays. And last week we looked at how to deal with doubts. And today I want to look with you at how to deal with defeats.

The fact is, everyone experiences failure in life. Life is never an unbroken series of victories. We all have setbacks and losses, and sometimes a defeat can seem to overwhelm you. On occasion, we bring defeat on ourselves, but more often it is thrust upon us.

Poor old Job felt overwhelmed. Look at Job 17:11 where he says, “My days have passed, my plans are shattered, and so are the desires of my heart.” Have you ever felt like that? -- “Man, I’ve been left behind!”

Now I realize that today, as we talk about how to rebound from a failure, some of you are saying, “But Pastor, I don’t need this message!” Well, let me tell you something -- you had better take notes, because someday you’ll need this message, because everybody experiences defeats in life. So, take it down now, and use it as preventive medicine! The fact is -- you will fail many times in life, but you are never a failure until you give up.

Now this morning I want to do two things:

- I. I want to look with you at some of the causes of failure, and
- II. I want to talk about what God’s Word says about getting a fresh start.

I. Five Possible Causes for Failure

1. We fail when we don’t plan ahead. You remember the old saying, “If you fail to plan, you’re planning to fail.” You’ve got to plan ahead. Look what Proverbs 27:12 (Living Bible) says, “A sensible man watches for problems ahead and prepares to meet them. The simpleton never looks and suffers the consequences.” Proverbs 16:9 (Living Bible) says, “We should make plans -- counting on God to direct us.” So, one of the reasons we fail is that we tend to be impulsive, and we just don’t plan ahead the way we should.

Let me ask you -- was it raining when Noah began to build the Ark? No! It didn’t rain for 120 years. That’s what I call “Long Range Planning”! One hundred twenty years he worked on

that Ark. Jesus, in one of His parables, said, “If one of you is planning to build a tower, he sits down first and figures out what it will cost, to see if he has enough money to finish the job. If he doesn’t, he will not be able to finish the tower after laying the foundation; and all who see what happened will make fun of him” (Luke 14:28,29, Good News Bible).

We fail because we don’t plan.

2. We fail when we think we have arrived. Proverbs 16:18 says, “Pride leads to destruction, and arrogance to downfall” (Good News Bible). We fail when we think we’ve got it all together. You see, you’re never going to get anywhere if you think you’re already there! Someone has said, “He who gets too big for his breeches will eventually be exposed in the end!” So watch out. The Bible says, “If you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don’t fall” (1 Corinthians 10:12). Pride causes us to fail.

It’s ironic that the average person always thinks he is above average. I don’t think there’s anyone in the world who thinks he’s average. One of the symptoms of pride is - we don’t think we need any advice. “I’ve got it all together; I don’t need anybody to tell me what it’s all about. Me and Jesus have a good thing goin’. I’m a Lone Ranger Christian!”

Proverbs 15:22 says, “Plans fail for lack of counsel, but with many advisers they succeed.” Remember the lesson of the whale. Just about the time you get to the top, and are ready to blow, that’s when you get harpooned! And remember that pride usually leads to greed - we want too much too soon. So watch out.

3. We fail when we are afraid to take risks. Proverbs 29:25 (Living Bible) says, “Fear of man is a dangerous trap, but to trust in God means safety.” Do you know what that means? It means that the moment you start worrying about what other people think, you’re doomed. It’s a trap. Fear of man is a “snare,” he says. And the fear of failure can be a cause of failure. Fran Tarkington said one time that “fear sets you up to be a loser.” Folks, the greatest failure is the failure to try. Did you hear about the man who directed in his will that four words be placed on his tombstone, and they were these: “At least he tried”? Sometimes you’ve got to take risks. That’s what brings abundance and success in life. Someone said, “Don’t be afraid to go out on a limb; that’s where the fruit is!”

4. We fail because we give up too soon. You see, the trouble with many people is that during trying times they just stop trying. You remember Dr. Robert Schuller’s dictum, “When the going gets tough, the tough get going.” “Failure,” someone said, “is the path of least persistence.” How many football games have you seen won in the last two seconds with a field goal? You just keep on keeping on. You never give up. Two weeks ago, we looked at a verse that said, “Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up” (Galatians 6:9). Proverbs 15:19 (Living Bible) says, “A lazy fellow has trouble all through life.” So, if at first you don’t succeed, you’re normal! Try again. Many a time success is just around the corner. You’re never a failure till you quit.

Thomas Edison tried 200 different elements before he found the right element to make the incandescent light bulb. And he once said, “Don’t call all those experiments a failure; call it an

education; I now know 199 ways that don't work!" You remember how many times Abraham Lincoln ran for political office and was defeated before he became President. Proverbs says we fail because we won't persevere. I remember seeing a neat little snippet in the Reader's Digest that said, "The value of the postage stamp is its ability to stick to one thing until it gets there!" Or think of a giant oak tree -- it's just a little nut that refused to give its ground! Proverbs says, "Don't give up; keep on working!"

5. The number one reason we fail is because we don't listen to God. Proverbs 114:12 says, "There is a way that seems right to a man, but in the end it leads to death." You see, God's Word is filled with guidelines and principles to make our lives all that God wants us to be, and all that we want to be. But most of the time we'd rather listen to our feelings — "Well, I feel that this is the right thing to do, even if the Bible teaches differently." And the fact is, God's Word is often the exact opposite of our natural inclinations. God's Word says, "The way to get is to give; the way to be honored is to be humble; the way to greatness is to be a servant." All of these so-called paradoxes of the Bible cut clean across our natural inclinations. Indeed, usually if you take the opposite of a natural inclination, you can figure that that is God's will! God says, "My ways are not your ways... My ways are higher than your ways" (Isaiah 55:8,9).

When we don't listen to God, we get in deep trouble. Lack of prayer causes a lot of failure. Regardless of the cause, we all fail at times. And I don't want to spend any more time discussing the causes of failure. I want, rather, to ask: What do you do when you have failed? How do you respond? You see, God is more interested in your future than He is in your past. Now, the Bible shows us very clearly how to get a fresh start.

II. How to Get a Fresh Start in Life

1. You accept responsibility for your own failure. Look at Proverbs 28:13 (Living Bible): "A man who refuses to admit his mistakes can never be successful. But if he confesses and forsakes them, he gets another chance." I love the Gospel of the "second chance." What is the writer saying here? He's saying, "If you've made a mistake, admit it" — "I blew it, I was wrong." Face up to it. Be honest with yourself and with others.

Most of us are experts at passing the buck. It's in our natural sin nature. Adam blamed Eve, and he blamed God - "The woman You put here with me gave me the fruit, and I ate it" (Genesis 3:12, Good News Bible). Losers are pros at blaming other people. The average prison inmate will give you a thousand excuses for being there: "Really, it wasn't my fault. I was framed." We blame the economy, we blame fate. Many people blame their parents, or their spouse, or the government. But God says, "If you want to start over, just admit your failures." I don't know where we got the idea, folks, that we have to pretend that we're perfect. We're not. You're not perfect, and, neither am I, so let's not blame other people for our failures.

In 1974, after an 88-game winning streak, the UCLA basketball team lost, and they lost to Notre Dame (of all teams!). And they lost in a game in which they had been ahead by eleven points. And next day, in the headlines, John Wooden, the UCLA coach, said, "Blame me." That's the mark of a winner. He didn't pass the buck. He said, "We just got overconfident." So accept responsibility for your own failure.

2. You stop regretting and start repenting when you've had a failure. Now, what does it mean to "repent"? The Greek word for "repentance" is "metanoia," which means "a change of mind," "to look at something in a different way," "to change your direction," "to change your heart." "Repentance" means "change" -- you do something about it! You don't just sit around and mope and say, "Oh, I'm a failure, a complete flop; I could never be used by God again! I'm worthless. God is going to set me on the shelf." No! You stop regretting, and you start repenting.

Look at this very important verse, 2 Corinthians 7:10 (Good News Bible): "The sadness that is used by God brings a change of heart that leads to salvation and there is no regret in that! But sadness that is merely human causes death." Now I want you to notice that there are two kinds of sadness mentioned in this verse: godly sadness, and worldly sadness - godly sorrow and worldly sorrow. What's the difference? Well, godly sorrow, it says, motivates a change of heart. It motivates you to do something -- "By the grace of God I'm going to change, I'm going to be different; I've learned my lesson. If you're going to fail, at least fail intelligently! Learn something from it! On the other hand, worldly sorrow is just demoralizing and depressing, and it causes death - "Oh, poor me!" One of the most devastating emotions in life is self-pity - "Poor me! Nobody likes me." You never learn anything at a pity party. That's worldly sorrow. But godly sorrow leads to repentance -- a change of heart. The fact is that almost every success in life is built on a failure. So, you learn from it. In fact, I'm convinced that some things are learned only through failure.

I remember when I was about five my mother got a new Moffat stove and, on the front of it, there was a plug where you could plug in a toaster or whatever. And one day I got especially inquisitive, and I found one of Mom's hairpins, and I stretched it and stuck the two ends in the plug. And I want to tell you - that day I learned through failure! - and the brand of that hairpin remained on my thumb and index finger for a long time.

There's a verse in Proverbs that says, "Sometimes it takes a painful experience to make us change our ways" (20:30, Good News Bible). Isn't that the truth? You stop regretting. Regretting doesn't change anything. It only keeps you looking in the past. It's like looking in the rearview mirror while driving down a winding road. It's a sure way to crack up -- if you're always focusing on the past. So, stop regretting, and do something about it. Change. Slam the door on self-pity.

3. You forget the former and focus on the future. That's what Paul is saying in Philippians 3:13,14, "Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus." Paul is saying, "Don't let your defeats defeat you."

Let me ask you a very personal question this morning: What memory in your life are you allowing to continue to manipulate you? And every time it comes up you think, "Oh, man, I wish I'd never done that. Oh, how I regret that!" And some of you are allowing your past to control your future, and that's a mistake. Your past is past; it's water under the bridge. You can't change the past by worrying about it, so let it go, and focus on the future. It's not so much where you've

been, but what direction your feet are headed now that counts. The past doesn't have to control you any more if you have accepted the forgiveness that Jesus offers.

I think a key example of this is the way in which Peter and Judas both reacted to failure. Both Peter and Judas were disciples. Both Peter and Judas denied Christ. Both Peter and Judas were devastated by their own failure. But they responded to their failure in totally different ways. Peter denied his Lord three times – the rooster crowed and Peter “went out and wept bitterly” (Matthew 26:75). Just imagine how Peter must have felt. Here's a man who had lived with Jesus for three years, and he says, “Lord, even I have not enough guts to stand up for You.” His self-esteem was zero. He felt like a complete failure; and he must have prayed, “O God, how could You ever use me? I've disgraced You, and I feel miserable and wretched and ashamed.” He felt genuine remorse and godly sorrow. But Peter stopped regretting, and he repented.

Judas, on the other hand, simply had worldly sorrow. Matthew 27:3-5 says,

When Judas, who had betrayed Him, saw that Jesus was condemned, he was seized with remorse and returned the thirty silver coins to the chief priests and the elders. “I have sinned,” he said, “for I have betrayed innocent blood.”

“What is that to us?” they replied. “That's your responsibility.”

So, Judas threw the money into the temple and left. Then he went away and hanged himself.

So, the one repented bitterly, while the other committed suicide.

Now I'm sure that Peter must have thought, “God can never use me again”; but on Easter morning when the women went to the tomb an angel told them Jesus had risen and said to tell His disciples and Peter. Why had He singled out Peter? I think it was because Peter probably felt, “I don't deserve to be a disciple any more. I've destroyed my credibility. I'm a miserable hypocrite.” And Peter needed a positive word of encouragement. So Jesus had directed the angel to say, “Go and tell My disciples, and don't forget Peter!” So Peter repented, and he changed, and the man who denied his Lord three times was the same man whom Jesus used 50 days later to preach on the Day of Pentecost, when 3,000 people committed their lives to Christ.

I don't care what your failure is in life. You are not washed up unless you choose to quit and reject the grace of God.

So, you accept responsibility for your failure; you stop regretting and start repenting; you forget the former and focus on the future; and there's a fourth and final step:

4. You trust God to work it all out. Romans 8:28 has been my life verse for half a century. Listen to it in Phillips' translation: “We know that to those who love God, who are called according to His plan, everything that happens fits into a pattern for good.”

My wife, as many of you know, is an absolute whiz at needlework. She is very gifted. And

sometimes I will pick up a piece she is working on, and it looks ugly! But then I realize that I'm looking at the back side; and when I turn it over, I see a beautiful work of art being crafted.

Many times in life we just see the under side, and God is looking at the top side. And He's working out a pattern in the fabric of our lives that's going to be beautiful. But sometimes from our point of view it looks like a jumble and a mess; and we look at our lives and think, "How could anything good come out of this?"

My mother was fond of repeating these glorious lines. Listen:

Not till the loom is silent
And the shuttles cease to fly,
Shall God unroll the canvas
And explain the reason why
The dark threads are as needful,
In the Weaver's skillful hand,
As the threads of gold and silver
In the pattern He has planned!

Do you want a fresh start? Look at 2 Corinthians 5:17 (Phillips): "If a man is in Christ he becomes a new person altogether -- the past is finished and gone; everything has become fresh and new." God specializes in new beginnings. It's never too late to start over. It's called being "born again." It doesn't mean turning over a new leaf; it means trusting Christ to give you a new life.

How does God take a minus in your life and turn it into a plus? He makes a Cross out of it. You see, God specializes in turning crucifixions into resurrections. And Jesus Christ was nailed to the Cross so that you could have a second chance -- a new beginning.

Joel 2:25 (King James Version) says, "I will restore to you the years that the locust has eaten." And in Isaiah 61:3 God says that He will "give a garland instead of ashes; the oil of gladness instead of mourning; the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit" (Revised Standard Version).

That's the good news!

AMEN.