

Looking back to move forward: Embracing our failures for greater fruitfulness

Introduction

Sometimes I feel like a colossal failure!

Does your mind do anything like mine? Quite randomly, I will remember an event, a conversation or something embarrassing. And it is horrible! It could be a memory from the recent past, but more often than not, it will be something that happened years, perhaps even decades ago and I wish I could erase it.

I often find myself squirming inwardly at the thought of a word I used, a badly timed joke or a situation that I really could have handled better. It is not uncommon to hear myself let out a small, audible, painful groan as an unwanted memory appears again in my head; something cringe-worthy, something I'm not proud of - something I wish would simply go away.

Have you ever wanted to step back in time into the body of your younger self and redo an event? To visit the past and press reset in the hope of a better outcome; one you might be able to achieve with knowledge or wisdom you feel you might have today - wisdom you wish you had back then? I certainly have and if somebody invented that time machine, I'd be first in line.

Years ago, I was speaking at an event to promote a Christian school to parents of potential students. I was the head-teacher (principal) of the school and anxious that my presentation would go well. There were overhead projector transparencies (remember those?) full of fascinating information, graphs and photographs, and my best talk was rehearsed and ready to go.

As I got into the first section, I felt a strange sensation in my stomach. I had wind. Then, suddenly, without any warning, I let out a burp - I hadn't planned to do it, it just came out. Straight into the microphone! A very awkward silence followed. What was I thinking? Was I insane? Did I think I was at home? As I looked around, a few saucer-like eyes were staring at me. I had no idea what to do. So, in an attempt to cover it up, I simply carried on as if nothing had happened. I offered no apology; I just continued with the talk. That was probably not my finest hour. Strangely, no parents chose to enrol their children in my school that day.

I have always loved sharing the Gospel - the good news of Jesus Christ - and there are many tools available to us to help us to do that, such as the Alpha Course or Christianity Explored. I was leading one such course, sharing the stories of Jesus with some people who were interested in finding out more, and I invited a young man in the church to help me. I thought it might help him to grow in his own faith journey.

This particular young man had a generous heart, and like all of us, God had done some wonderful things in his life. But, again like all of us, God wasn't finished with him yet. Prior to this course, we had shared some conversations about some matters of integrity in his life.

About halfway through the course, I became unavailable to conduct one of the evenings, so I asked him to lead the course that night. He was happy to do so, but several days later, one of the guests let me know that my friend had generously given away some merchandise that, let's say, was illegally obtained! I was furious, not least because we had recently spoken about the importance of Christians (and in particular, my friend) obeying the laws of the land; in particular, 'thou shall not steal'!

The obvious thing to do was to have another chat with him. Unfortunately, I was so cross with him that the conversation I had planned in my head quickly became a rather ugly lecture – a complete dressing down. I just told him what I thought.

My failure to love and apply grace in that moment (and to recognise my own responsibilities in the situation) seriously dented our friendship for several years, until eventually, I knew that I needed to apologise for my explosive approach to the problem. My friend (who is of a much larger build to me) later told me that I had been so disrespectful and aggressive that day that, had I not been a pastor, he would have decked me where I stood!

As I look back over my life so far (as I write this, I am now 60), I seem to have experienced failure way more than I have enjoyed success. The Christian School I was trying to promote was in decline when I joined the staff. I believed I could turn things around, but I was wrong. A friend once told me that it takes as much faith to close a ministry as it does to begin one. That didn't help. Whether it was God's will or not for the school to close down, to my mind, I felt I had failed. I had failed to bring it to the financial stability and growth it needed to survive and flourish.

I then became convinced that God was calling me to become a pastor. When the senior minister of my own church announced that he was moving on to other pastures, I applied for his job – with no experience or qualifications! Needless to say, I was not considered to be a serious candidate. However, several years later, the same thing happened in a different church. The senior minister resigned from his post, but this time the elders of the church actually invited me to apply for the role. This is progress, I thought.

However, several years later, I was forced to resign. I had failed to bring unity to a struggling leadership team, and it was suggested that a different face might do a better job. I temporarily left the ministry and embarked on a course of theological study. When I returned to pastoral ministry several years later, I again found myself facing issues of unity in another congregation and leadership team; and again failing to find the necessary solutions. Failure seemed more familiar to me than success.

In my times of reflection, I sometimes recall conversations that I could have handled better; I remember knee-jerk reactions that, in hindsight, I should have controlled, and I see

opportunities lost and dreams failing to come true. I have criticized those I should have supported and have fallen into self-pity. I have white-washed some of my poor decisions and have blamed others for things not working out the way they should have.

Can anybody out there relate to this?

In the Bible, the book of Deuteronomy is all about looking back in order to move forward. The people of Israel were called to revisit their past, warts and all, as vital preparation for what was to come – the Promised Land. They needed to face some home truths if they were to receive their inheritance. They needed to embrace a very painful past in order to own it. This was not an easy thing to do but essential if they were to move forward in God's purposes.

There are times in our lives when we need to do the same thing.

At the beginning of Deuteronomy, we find ourselves like flies on a wall, listening to a long and powerful speech by the great man, Moses: his first of three sermons. He is speaking to thousands of people, to 'all' Israel just outside the Promised Land; a large crowd, 'as numerous as the stars of heaven' (1: 10).

The location is described as, 'beyond the Jordan in the wilderness, in the Arabah' (1:1); 'in the land of Moab' (1:5). The author wants us to notice this. Why? Because in just these few words, there are three important descriptions of the place where the Israelites stand at this momentous point of time in their history: the wilderness, the Arabah and the land of Moab.

The word Wilderness comes from the Hebrew word transliterated as *Midbar*. It describes an uninhabited piece of land uncultivated by humans. The Arabah has a similar meaning, but probably refers to a specific area in the Jordan valley, south of the Dead Sea. It was known to be hot, dry and desolate. The land of Moab was occupied by the descendants of Lot, Abraham's nephew. They lived a little distance away from the Arabah in the areas more congenial to planting and harvesting. The Moabites were, therefore, in effect, distant cousins of the Israelites, which is why Moses was instructed to keep the peace with them (Deut 2: 9), even if the Moabites had missed that memo and were antagonistic and less than friendly - and not that far away. In fact, they were dangerously close.

So, imagine yourself, listening to a long speech in a hot, dry and dusty wilderness in a place where you may not feel entirely safe. That is where God wanted them to look back and recall some painful memories and some home truths. It was not their comfort zone. The wonderful stories of God's salvation, provision and faithfulness will be recounted, but they will be mixed with the hard realities of their parents' sins, their leaders' shortcomings, and their own failures. They will need to face these if they are to enter into God's promises. And they will face them in the place where they are most dependent on God for his provision and protection: the open wilderness - where an enemy might attack at any moment.

God sometimes chooses the wilderness to do his greatest work in us.

And sometimes the desert of dependence is the only place on the planet where we find the courage to truly face our failures.

In verses 2 – 3, we read:

‘Normally, it takes only eleven days to travel from Mount Sinai to Kadesh-barnea, going by way of Mount Seir. But forty years after the Israelites left Egypt, on the first day of the eleventh month, Moses addressed the people of Israel, telling them everything the Lord had commanded him to say’ (NLT).

The hardest truth that the Israelites must face is distilled and focused into these two verses. What should have taken days ended up costing many years. The failure by some to be faithful to God and obedient to his Word resulted in a long and difficult journey for all.

Interestingly, Moses’ speech comes shortly after an unusual period of success described in verse four. Moses and the Israelite soldiers had just won two battles and defeated two kings.

In my own life, I have found that the biggest temptation in life is the one to believe that any success I might experience is due directly to my own cleverness, wisdom or righteousness. In those times, I need a reminder of the grace of God. I need to walk back out of the comfort zone and return to the place of dependence - the very place where Moses led the Israelites to hear his confronting message.

God is in charge and he calls the shots. Our modern world often tells us to forget the past and simply move on. The past is the past it declares; you can’t change it, so it’s onwards and upwards. But God has a habit of calling his people to stop and remember. He wants us to remember his Word and his faithfulness, but he may also want us to revisit a dark place with new eyes before moving on.

It may be the place of our own failure, or we may feel we are victims on the raw end of the failures of others. It may be that life has not granted us the success we dreamed of. As the Israelites stood ready to hear Moses’ first sermon, they were about to hear of their parents’ sins, their leaders’ disastrous choices and their own lack of faith. But there is hope – a lot of it. Sometimes looking back, with the Holy Spirit’s help, can provide the very key we need to move forward with God.