



MY FAILURES ARE NOT FATAL

SERIES: THAT YOU MAY BELIEVE

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John 18:1-27

39th Message

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One of my favorite Charlie Brown cartoons shows Charlie occupied on a woodworking project. When Lucy asks, "How's the birdhouse coming along, Charlie Brown?" he replies, "Well, I'm a lousy carpenter. I can't nail straight. I can't saw straight. I always split the wood. I'm nervous. I lack confidence. I'm stupid. I have poor taste and absolutely no sense of design." In the last frame he concludes, "So all things considered, it's coming along okay!"

Growth is slow, and life is demanding. Often we find ourselves in situations that ask more of us than we were made to give.

A young man was appointed president of a bank at the tender age of 32. The promotion was far beyond his wildest dreams, and also very frightening. He went to the venerable old chairman of the board to ask his advice on how to become a good bank president. "What is the most important thing for me to do as a new president?" he asked him. "Make right decisions," was the gentleman's terse answer. The young man thought for a moment, and said, "Thank you very much; that is very helpful. But can you be a bit more specific? How do I make right decisions?" The wise old man answered, "Experience." Exasperated, the young president said, "But sir, that is why I'm here. I don't have the experience I need to make right decisions. How do I get experience?" "Wrong decisions," was the old man's reply.

Spiritual maturity doesn't come easily in the Christian life. We make a lot of mistakes along the way. Certainly, this was true of Peter, as we will see in our study this morning in the eighteenth chapter of the gospel of John. Those of us who find the maturing process slow and painful will be encouraged by this story in which John contrasts the poise of Jesus and the panic of Peter. As the spotlight alternates back and forth between these two, Jesus is a picture of dignity and majesty, while Peter is continually doing the wrong thing.

The backdrop to our passage in John 18 is a vow (recorded in chapter 13) that Peter made some months before the incident recorded here. I will read Matthew's version of the occasion of Peter's vow because it is a little more detailed:

Then Jesus told them, "This very night you will all fall away on account of me, for it is written: 'I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock will be scattered.' But after I have risen, I will go ahead of you into Galilee." Peter replied, "Even if all fall away on account of you, I never will." "I tell you the truth," Jesus answered, "this very night, before the rooster crows, you will disown me three times." But Peter declared, "Even if I have to die with you, I will never disown you." And all the other disciples said the same.

In John 18, where the apostle describes Jesus' arrest and the trials that followed that event, we discover what happened to Peter's vow. Jesus may have undergone as many

as six trials; we are not certain as to what exactly took place. Here, John records two trials, the political trial before Annas, and the civil trial that followed.

18:1 When Jesus had spoken these words, [John is referring to the Upper Room Discourse, recorded in chapters 13-17] He went forth with His disciples over the ravine of the Kidron, where there was a garden, [actually an orchard] into which He Himself entered, and His disciples.

Together with Jesus, the disciples make their way through the streets of Jerusalem. It is evening, and the residents of the city are in their homes, celebrating the Passover Feast. These men, however, plan on spending the night in the garden since there is no place for them to stay in the city.

18:2 Now Judas also, who was betraying Him, knew the place; for Jesus had often met there with His disciples.

John refers to Judas as simply "the betrayer." To John, Judas was an ordinary man who had been led astray by his greed. He wasn't a monster. He was just an ordinary person like you or I who loved money. Judas stands for all time as an illustration of the truth, recorded by Paul in his letter to Timothy, that the love of money is a root of all evil (1 Tim. 6:10).

18:3 Judas then, having received the [Roman] cohort, [an infantry detachment of about 600 men] and officers from the chief priests and the Pharisees, came there with lanterns and torches and weapons.

There is a note of irony here. Our Lord is alone and unarmed, the disciples are asleep, and into the garden marches a search party of 600, accompanied by the officials from the Sanhedrin, a number of curious onlookers, with all of the accompanying noise and racket. But they cannot find Jesus in the darkness. He could have escaped, but he didn't. On the contrary, he finds them! That is what is so striking about this arrest. Jesus orchestrated the whole thing.

18:4 Jesus therefore, knowing all the things that were coming upon Him, [none of this caught him by surprise] went forth [he took the initiative; he found them], and said to them, "Whom do you seek?" They answered Him, "Jesus the Nazarene." He said to them, "I am {He.}" And Judas also who was betraying Him, was standing with them. When therefore He said to them, "I am {He.}" they drew back, and fell to the ground.

Jesus' reply so startles the search party that the first rank takes a step backwards and stumbles over the men behind them, so that they all fall down like dominoes. Perhaps it is because Jesus uses the name of deity. In the Old Testament, the name for the God of Israel, Yahweh, or Jehovah, is taken from the Hebrew verb "to be." What Jesus said was, "I Am" (not "I am He"). So powerful is his statement it fright-

ens this armed contingent of 600-plus. How ironic! One unarmed man stands against a Roman cohort (armed with clubs and swords, according to the other gospel writers), and one word from him causes them to fall to the ground.

18:7 Again therefore He asked them, "Whom do you seek?" And they said, "Jesus the Nazarene." Jesus answered, "I told you that I am {He}; if therefore you seek Me, let these go their way," that the word might be fulfilled which He spoke, 'Of those whom Thou hast given Me I lost not one.'"

Jesus offers himself to the cohort, and requests that the disciples may go their way. According to the other accounts, at this point the disciples fled, all except Peter, good old Peter, who had boasted, "No matter what happens, I won't deny you." Having already climbed out on a limb, he couldn't leave at this point.

In fact, he goes further.

18:10 Simon Peter therefore having a sword, drew it, and struck the high priest's slave, and cut off his right ear; and the slave's name was Malchus.

Peter goes after an innocent bystander, a slave of the high priest. (This did nothing to endear Jesus to the high priest.) Luke, the physician, says that at this point Jesus touched the man's ear and healed him.

18:11 Jesus therefore said to Peter, "Put the sword into the sheath; [Matthew records that Jesus also added these words, "Peter, if I wanted to, I could call forth 12 legions of angels (72,000 angels) to come to my defense."] the cup which the Father has given Me, shall I not drink it?"

For all his zeal, Peter was actually frustrating the Father's attempts to offer up his Son. According to Isaiah 53, it was the will of the Father to bruise the Son. He had to be put to death. There was no other way to achieve salvation for us. Peter was thwarting God's efforts to bring good. Have you ever lopped off someone's ear, hoping to do good for God? I can relate to Peter's action. I, too, often try to help the Lord by trying to bring salvation to someone. Most of the time I succeed only in upsetting God's plan, like Abraham, who so desired to have the son of promise that he disobeyed God and had a son through Hagar, his slave.

Once more now, in John's summary of the trials before the Jewish priests, the spotlight shines on Jesus.

18:12 So the {Roman} cohort and the commander, and the officers of the Jews, arrested Jesus and bound Him, and led Him to Annas first; for he was father-in-law of Caiaphas, who was high priest that year.

Actually, high priests were appointed for life. What John means by the words "that year" is that Caiaphas was the high priest in that fateful year when Jesus was crucified. Annas had been the high priest, but he was deposed by the Roman officials because they didn't trust him. He was gaining too much power so they removed him about 15 years earlier, replacing him with Caiaphas, his son-in-law. As far as the Jews were concerned, there was still only one high priest, and that was Annas; they regarded Caiaphas as a usurper. That was why they took Jesus first to Annas; they wanted a judgment from him.

18:14 Now Caiaphas was the one who had advised the Jews that it was expedient for one man to die on behalf of the people.

Earlier, Caiaphas had made that unwitting prediction. John simply takes his word as a prophecy that one man would die a substitutionary death for the whole nation. But what Caiaphas meant was that this one must die in order to save the nation. He pointed out to the Sanhedrin that if the whole nation continued to follow Jesus, the Romans would take away their Temple. Thus he said that it was expedient for one man to die for the nation.

Caiaphas was referring to Jesus, of course. Thus was our Lord's death sentence pronounced. John records this to point out that Jesus didn't have a chance. This was a kangaroo court. The Jews had already decided on the verdict. As far as the court was concerned, all they were doing was trying to find evidence that would convict Jesus in a Roman court. They themselves couldn't put him to death, because the Romans had taken away from them the right to exercise capital punishment. Only Rome could put Jesus to death, and so the kangaroo court had to find a charge that would convict him under Roman law. (We know from the other gospel accounts that the Jews paid people to give false witness about Jesus, but they couldn't get them together to agree. They had already decided that they were going to execute him.)

Now the spotlight shines once more on Peter.

18:15 And Simon Peter was following Jesus, [According to Matthew, he was far off. Apparently, he fled in the darkness after he attempted to defend the Lord. He came upon the procession as it made its way back into the city and he joined them, entering with them into the court that was in front of Caiaphas' house] and {so was} another disciple. [John] Now that disciple was known to the high priest, and entered with Jesus into the court of the high priest, but Peter was standing at the door outside. So the other disciple, who was known to the high priest, went out and spoke to the doorkeeper, and brought in Peter. The slave-girl therefore who kept the door said to Peter, "You are not also {one} of this man's disciples, are you?" He said, "I am not."

At this point, Peter had no reason whatever to deny his association with Jesus. In fact, had he said "yes," he might have been able to join the "other disciple" and view the proceedings. But he panicked and lied. Someone has said, "A lie is an abomination to the Lord, but a very present help in time of trouble." Many would agree with that. People in trouble usually lie.

18:18 Now the slaves and the officers were standing {there,} having made a charcoal fire [this will be significant later], for it was cold [it was March, a time when it is quite cold in Jerusalem] and they were warming themselves; and Peter also was with them, standing and warming himself.

The other gospel writers record that there was a lot of questioning going on around that charcoal fire as to Peter's identity. One woman stared at him, trying to recall where she had seen him before.

Once more the spotlight shines on Jesus, contrasting his behavior before the high priest with Peter's behavior before the slave-girl.

18:19 The high priest therefore questioned Jesus about His disciples, and about His teaching. Jesus answered him, "I have spoken openly to the world; I always taught in synagogues, and in the temple, where all the

Jews come together; and I spoke nothing in secret. Why do you question Me? Question those who have heard what I spoke to them; behold, these know what I said."

Jesus was not the leader of a subversive cult. He did not say one thing in private and another in public. "If you want to know what I believe," he is saying, in effect, "just ask anyone who heard me. I taught openly in the synagogues and the Temple."

18:22 And when He had said this, one of the officers standing by gave Jesus a blow, saying, "Is that the way You answer the high priest?" Jesus answered him, "If I have spoken wrongly, bear witness of the wrong; but if rightly, why do you strike Me?" Annas therefore sent Him bound to Caiaphas the high priest.

As is the case in our system today, under Roman law an accused was presumed to be innocent unless and until he was proven guilty. (In fact, most of our laws are based on Roman law.) It was illegal to strike an accused to wring a confession out of him. That is why Jesus questions the man who struck him. This is the same Jesus who said in the Sermon on the Mount, "if someone slaps you on one cheek, offer him the other." How interesting. Jesus knew what to do and what to say in all situations, when to be strong, when to be active, when to be quiet. He was courteous at times, bold and aggressive at other times. John describes him in the memorable phrase, "He was full of grace and truth." How impressive Jesus must have been. People were naturally drawn by his gentle manliness, his winsomeness, his ability to handle every situation. What poise and majesty he manifested in all circumstances.

And then there is Peter. Once more, the spotlight shines on him.

18:25 Now Simon Peter was standing and warming himself. They said therefore to him, "You are not also {one} of His disciples, are you?" He denied {it}, and said, "I am not." One of the slaves of the high priest, being a relative of the one whose ear Peter cut off, said, "Did I not see you in the garden with Him?" Peter therefore denied {it} again; and immediately a cock crowed.

This is a condensed account of what was probably an hour-long conversation. Peter's Galilean accent betrays him as he stands by the charcoal fire, warming himself in company with the soldiers. He sounded like a Texan in Boston! Everyone could tell where he came from. The questioning as to his identity frustrated him. Finally, one of the servants, who was a relative of the slave whose ear he had cut off, asks him again, "Didn't I see you in the garden with Him?"

Peter becomes rattled at this point. The other gospel writers record that he cursed, uttering an oath and declaring that he never knew the man. The moment he said this, the sound of a rooster crowing pierced the morning air, just as Jesus had said . . . and Peter remembered. The other gospels say that at this point Jesus, who must have been standing on the balcony above, looked at Peter. When Peter saw those eyes, brimming with mercy and tender love, gazing upon him, he broke down. Quickly leaving the area, he wept bitterly as he ran through the streets of Jerusalem.

It will be helpful to understand Peter's role among the disciples. He was the one to whom everyone looked as the leader of the apostolic band. But all of the gospel writers, to their astonishment, record the fact that it was Peter, the sup-

posed strong one, who denied Jesus. On occasion he acted inappropriately, but apparently with courage, but when real courage, moral courage, was called for, he collapsed.

There is much of Peter in all of us, isn't there? But what is the secret to being like Jesus? We want to be like him, don't we? Who wouldn't want to be "full of grace and truth"? We want to do what is right and say what is right, and we want to do so in a winsome, honorable way, but somehow we are always getting it wrong.

A.W. Tozer has written on what he calls "right gone wrong." He says:

There are so many areas of our life that in our effort to do right we do wrong. When in our determination to be bold, we become brazen; when in our desire to be frank we become rude; when in our effort to become watchful we become suspicious; when we seek to be serious and become somber; when we mean to be conscientious and become over scrupulous and meddlesome.

Everyone can identify with that. We want to become the right kind of people. But how do we do it? How can we change?

We find the answer in chapter 21. This account in chapter 18 dovetails with chapter 21, and we must take them together. How does Jesus regard us when, wanting to do right, we fail? As we will see, the Lord's response is always redemptive, loving, and positive. He did not dismiss Peter, and he does not dismiss us.

Remember that Jesus had already warned Peter. He told him, "*Satan's desire is to sift you* (Jesus used the plural form to refer to all the disciples); all of you men, *like wheat* (in other words, he wanted to see if there was anything real and genuine there, or was it all chaff), *but I have prayed for you* (singular pronoun, referring to Peter), *that your faith may not fail; and after you are restored, strengthen your brothers.*" Teach them how to succeed. Teach them what to do when they fail. Teach them how to pick themselves up and get going again.

When we fail, our Lord's response is always redemptive. He didn't look scornfully at Peter. He didn't reject him. How unlike us. He looked at him with sadness, and he restored him.

Let's see what happened. The resurrection has already occurred, and the disciples are out fishing. Seeing the Lord on the lakeside, they pull the boat onto shore. Jesus had already made a charcoal fire on the beach. That was the first thing Peter saw when he got out of the water — a charcoal fire. The sight of the fire vividly recalled to his mind a conversation around another charcoal fire, the one in Caiaphas' garden on the fateful night when he denied his Lord. Jesus builds a fire to bring back to Peter's mind his three denials, because he is going to make three restorations, as we see in. Chapter 21:

21:15 So when they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon, {son} of John [the name Jesus used when he first called him], do you love Me more than these?" He said to Him, "Yes, Lord; You know that I love You." He said to him, "Tend My lambs." He said to him again a second time, "Simon, {son} of John, do you love Me?" He said to Him, "Yes, Lord; You know that I love You." He said to him, "Shepherd My sheep." He said to him the third time, "Simon, {son} of John, do you love Me?" Peter was grieved because He said to

him the third time, "Do you love Me?" And he said to Him, "Lord, You know all things; You know that I love You." Jesus said to him, "Tend My sheep. Truly, truly, I say to you, when you were younger, you used to gird yourself, and walk wherever you wished; but when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will gird you, and bring you where you do not wish to {go.}" Now this He said, signifying by what kind of death he would glorify God. And when He had spoken this, He said to him, "Follow Me!"

"Follow Me!" There is the secret! There is the only way to change. Paul asked the Galatians, "Are you so foolish, having begun in the Spirit, are you now perfected in the flesh?" It was by faith that we began the Christian life. We could do nothing to save ourselves, to make ourselves acceptable in God's sight, so we threw ourselves on the Lord and gladly accepted his salvation. But, says Paul, that is not merely the entrance into the Christian life, it is the way to grow and mature. We must keep on trusting and relying on Jesus. Everything else is but the activity of the flesh. Whenever we say, "I'm going to follow Jesus no matter what," and then rely on our unaided humanity, our self-will, our personality and ability to do what God has called us to do, we are acting out of the flesh. But, Jesus said, "the flesh profits nothing" (John 6).

And remember that "the flesh" is not merely sexual immorality and deceit and other obvious shortcomings. The flesh can appear very religious. Some people are upright, but they are uptight as well. For them, goodness is a stern, demanding business. Their faith is like a dull habit. They may appear righteousness, but they lack the love that emanates from contact with God. Edicts and creeds and rituals will never modify our behavior. The problem with rules and regulations is that they have no mechanism for overriding our natural tendencies to do wrong. All they do is reveal those tendencies and say to us, "You should!" "You shouldn't!" "You can't!" The rest up to us.

The problem is, our vows are misdirected. We vow that we will hold our tongues, manage our money better, be more loving and gracious to our mates, spend more time with our children, etc. But often this is just the flesh vowing to be more religious. It doesn't last. What we need to vow is that we are going to follow the Lord Jesus. Let him put his finger on the things that need to be changed, and ask him to change us. Then, as he does so we will be able to act as he acted in stressful situations. But not always. We will fail at times. Some will discover that change is immediate. If you are one of those, be thankful; it is God who has done it. Oth-

ers find spiritual growth difficult and painful, but they are growing nevertheless. All of us are growing, not by self-effort, but by grace, as we focus on God and depend on him.

Here is how one writer put it:

Jesus did the most ordinary kind of jobs. It takes all of God's power in me to do the simplest things his way. Christianity is not a way of doing special things. It is a special way of doing everything. Can I talk to a woman as Jesus did? Or ask for a drink of water, or cook fish; or walk through my hometown; or talk to my men? It is bosses and basins, and towels, and washing feet. The dusty pedestrian duties of life demand God almighty in us. It takes as much of the power of God for me to go to my office and sit at the desk and talk on the phone (as I should), as much of God's power to go through my regular routine, as it does to for others to preach a sermon, or write a religious book, an evening with my wife, a golf tournament with my son, an ice cream adventure with my daughter, a conference on financial budgets.

I'm not supposed to be a gilt-edged spook with wings making a holy hum. I'm supposed to be a normal, natural, down to earth human being, full of creation's practical Spirit.

Once we understand this we are on the road to becoming winsome and attractive Christians, "full of grace and truth." There will a different quality about us, one that speaks to others of God's goodness and his ability to change us. We can fail, and we can admit failure. We don't need facades. We don't need to pretend. We can be honest, genuine and transparent, and those qualities will draw others to Jesus.

Goodness is a job for God. Whatever conformity to goodness we achieve is the fruit of his doing. As for myself, I agree with my friend, David Roper, who writes: "If I have made any progress at all it has not been by quantum leaps and bounds, but through a process of tentative steps and numerous falls. It has been a creeping thing, better seen in retrospect than in prospect. Everything worthwhile takes time, but time is on our side. God is wonderfully patient. He will never give up on us until his work is done. And he is working even now toward that distant end. We are becoming today what we will inevitably be."

*Wait for God's silent molding;
Wait for His full unfolding;
Wait for the days to be.*

(Francis Havergal).

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