

When You Have Turned

Luke 22:31-34 | November 29, 2020 | Bryce Beale

How do you handle failure? I do not mean “you” generally, but you yourself. How do *you* handle failure?

You have to handle it somehow, because as you live your life there it is. “You...must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”¹ That is our standard, the very glory and perfection of God, but “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.”²

A Scripture writer as strict and earnest as James himself does not hesitate to say, “we all stumble in many ways. And if anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man.”³ To persist unrepentant in moral failure is to prove you are no Christian, it is to fall flat upon your face into the mud of unholiness; yet to *stumble* is something, James says, “we all” do, all of us who are in Christ.

You could in fact say that the primary difference between a believer and unbeliever is not in the individual sins they do or do not commit, but rather in how they respond to those sins, how they handle the failure.

So, when you fail, how do you handle that?

You may be among that number of persons who have felt the pain of failure, the disappointment it produces in others and the scorn it wins from judging eyes, and who have determined to retreat from those eyes. You know of course that your retreat is itself a failure, but it is a more private one. You once employed your gifts actively in the body of Christ, you took risks, you formed relationships—but now you are a very safe, Sunday-morning Christian. You do not say or attempt too much, for fear of failure and its consequences.

Or you may be another category of person, one who stoically faces the pain of failure by deadening yourself to the opinions of others. You cope with critique by ceasing to care. You have heard so many wrong and biased opinions that you now lump all opinions against yourself together in that heap as probably wrong

¹ Matt. 5:48 (ESV).

² Rom. 3:23.

³ Jas. 3:2.

or, if right, unimportant. You handle the pain of failing by not really caring, not thinking too closely about your failures.

Or again, you may be someone who handles failure by dressing it up in its Sunday best. When you fail, you flee the consequences by standing by your failure to the bitter end, rationalizing and defending what you have done as, by some unusual logic, virtuous after all. You may have been lax in your morals, but at least you were not self-righteous, which would have been much worse. Or, you may have been self-righteous, but at least you were not lax in your morals, which would have been much worse.

These are natural ways to handle failure—but they are all alike failures in themselves. They may lessen the pain when you fail, but they only drive you deeper down into that failure and make it easier for you to fail and fail again in the same ways. These are natural reactions, but they are not Christian reactions.

When you surrender your life to Christ and begin to follow him along the path of discipleship, the whole world and its ruler, the devil, rise up in union to make you stumble. And at times, you will stumble.

But when you stumble, you do not have to plummet headlong into the ground. As a Christian, you catch yourself, or better, you are caught by God's hand—you face your own failure openly and with healthy resolve. As the Psalmist says,

The steps of a man are established by the Lord,
when he delights in his way;
though he fall, he shall not be cast headlong,
for the Lord upholds his hand.⁴

This is the lesson that we, along with Jesus' apostles in the upper room only hours before his betrayal and arrest, learn.

LUKE 22:31-34

There are two parts to this text: failure, and response. Simon is another name for Peter, the head of the apostles. Here he stands in as a sort of representative for the rest, but also as a representative for all disciples of all times. He stands in for us, too.

⁴ Ps. 37:23-24.

And Jesus desired that we today would have this passage set before us, so that in Peter we might learn how to fail well.

So we will consider, first, what Peter's failure is. And then, how he as a Christian will respond to that failure.

Failure

First then, let us consider Peter's actual failure, foretold in this text.

See verse 31 again. "Simon, Simon, behold, Satan demanded to have you, that he might sift you like wheat."

You know from reading the New Testament that often a person will have more than one name. And that was true of Peter—also called, as in our text, Simon. He was from birth named after the second-born of Jacob, Simeon, and early in Luke this is the name used to refer to the man.

But once Simon leaves his nets and becomes a follower of Jesus, he is almost always called "Peter." The reason for this is given in Matthew 16, just after Peter identifies Jesus as "the Christ, the Son of the Living God": "And I tell you," Jesus answers him, "you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church."⁵

Though invisible in the English, the reason for the renaming is obvious in the Greek: "You are *Petros*, and on this *petra* I will build my church." Peter means "rock."

Returning then to our text, we may wonder why Jesus calls out, "Simon, Simon," instead of "Peter, Peter"—after all, Peter is almost never called Simon after he becomes a disciple. We are not told why "Simon" is used here but I think we can make a good guess: because the apostle does not here deserve the title "rock."

Peter is about to fail quite largely, probably in degree beyond any failure you have ever committed against the Lord. Verse 34: "Jesus said, 'I tell you, Peter, the rooster will not crow this day, until you deny three times that you know me.'"

Before the sun should rise on the next day, this mighty rock would three times deny his association with Jesus—even deny any passing acquaintance with him! This will take place, you may

⁵ Vv. 16, 18.

remember, in the courtyard outside the high priest's house, while Jesus is being tried there. Not only will it happen that same day, it happens even this same chapter!

We will encounter the tale in verses 54 onward, but let me read them now so you have his failure in your mind:

Then they seized him and led him away, bringing him into the high priest's house, and Peter was following at a distance. And when they had kindled a fire in the middle of the courtyard and sat down together, Peter sat down among them. Then a servant girl, seeing him as he sat in the light and looking closely at him, said, "This man also was with him." But he denied it, saying, "Woman, I do not know him." And a little later someone else saw him and said, "You also are one of them." But Peter said, "Man, I am not." And after an interval of about an hour still another insisted, saying, "Certainly this man also was with him, for he too is a Galilean." But Peter said, "Man, I do not know what you are talking about." And immediately, while he was still speaking, the rooster crowed. And the Lord turned and looked at Peter. And Peter remembered the saying of the Lord, how he had said to him, "Before the rooster crows today, you will deny me three times." And he went out and wept bitterly.⁶

This is not a rock. This is a pre-Jesus fisherman named Simon—or at least, that is what he looks like here.

I do not doubt that you yourself at times have cringed to see just how much like your old self you can behave. You cringe because you are not your old self anymore, if you are in Christ. You have walked a ways with Jesus, and he has transformed your heart to beat after God. You have died with him, your new self has risen and you walk in newness of life. Old habits have died; you have mortified them by the Spirit. The change is noticeable. You have become Peter, the rock.

Yet, on rare occasion, you are Simon again. And that reversion to old habits is all the more agonizing because it comes at the far end of so many changes, so much growth, so much hope.

⁶ Vv. 54-62.

In fact, you were doing so well that you may have eased up your guard. Old temptations seemed so completely dead to you, that you never expected them to be hiding in ambush behind Ai with Joshua's men.

This was true of Peter—or Simon, I should say—in our text. His failure is made worse by how confident he is that he will not fail, in verse 33: “Peter said to him, “Lord, I am ready to go with you both to prison and to death.””

Mark 14:29 adds an illuminating extra detail: “Peter said to him, ‘Even though they all fall away, I will not.’”

Peter claims for himself not just typical obedience, but extreme obedience: he will obey “both to prison and to death.” And he will obey even though every other disciple does not. He is willing, he says, to walk that lonely road of discipleship on the way to Golgotha. His commitment is absolute.

But that is Peter talking about theories. This determination will persist at Jesus' arrest—there, Peter will cut off an ear. But once his blood has cooled a bit and he is by the fire in the courtyard of the high priest, with time to think about how death feels prolonged over hours, hung upon a Roman cross, he becomes Simon again.

In our text, Simon would have done well to heed the counsel given to the overeager king of Syria, Ben-Hadad, when he threatened Israel. The king of Israel replied, “Let not him who straps on his armor boast himself as he who takes it off.”⁷

The New Testament equivalent is given in 1 Corinthians 10:12: “Therefore let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall.”

As Christians, we are not to live in perpetual fear of failure—“perfect love casts out fear,” says the Apostle John.⁸ But we are constantly to be watchful and awake to the lures and temptations around us. As Jesus told his Twelve just one chapter ago, “watch yourselves lest your hearts be weighed down.”⁹

⁷ 1 Ki. 20:11.

⁸ 1 Jn. 4:18.

⁹ Luke 21:34.

Peter was not. He had full confidence in his own commitment, in his own Peter-ishness. He believed he stood, and was not concerned about falling. And that made his fall, and his failure, all the worse.

Not final failure

There then is Peter's failure, and quite a great one. Considered in itself, it seems about as bad as Judas' betrayal of Jesus. Luke alone makes it clear what Peter is denying three times: that he even *knows* this man Jesus. Like Judas, Peter will betray Jesus for personal gain—in his case, survival. And to make this betrayal in Jesus' hour of greatest agony seems like a death knell for Peter's discipleship.

He is again Simon and, we expect, shall be Simon evermore. We are not surprised when, toward the end of John's Gospel, Simon Peter says to his companions, "I am going fishing."¹⁰ We expect that to be the end of the story.

But it is not.

Simon, as a Christian, fails much like non-Christians fail. He fails quite a bit like Judas even. But how he responds to that failure is far different, and therein lies the key.

You who know Christ, you too will fail—not as a characteristic, but as an unfortunate part of life in this world. What then? What comes afterward? How should you handle failure, biblically?

We find our answer in this text when, by way of Jesus' higher understanding, we are granted a glimpse into the spiritual realities behind what Peter experiences, behind his failure. There is more going on in the spiritual realm than the physical eye can see, and it is there, in the spiritual realm, that the entire difference is felt.

See what Jesus, in part at least, attributes Peter's coming failure to, in verse 31: "Simon, Simon, behold, Satan demanded to have you, that he might sift you like wheat."

What you cannot see in the English of this verse is that when Jesus says "you," he does not mean Simon only. That is a plural "you," like "you all." Satan asked permission of God to sift all the

¹⁰ John 21:3.

disciples, all Twelve. In Matthew and in Mark, Jesus predicts that all these disciples will forsake him in the hours ahead, in fulfillment of a prophecy from Zechariah 13:7: “Strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered.”

What can it mean that the devil demanded to have these men, that he might sift them? We would honestly be in the dark on this question, were it not that the same thing happened in the case of Job. The first chapter of that book presents this scenario:

Now there was a day when the sons of God came to present themselves before the LORD, and Satan also came among them. The LORD said to Satan, “From where have you come?” Satan answered the LORD and said, “From going to and fro on the earth, and from walking up and down on it.” And the LORD said to Satan, “Have you considered my servant Job, that there is none like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man, who fears God and turns away from evil?” Then Satan answered the LORD and said, “Does Job fear God for no reason? Have you not put a hedge around him and his house and all that he has, on every side? You have blessed the work of his hands, and his possessions have increased in the land. But stretch out your hand and touch all that he has, and he will curse you to your face.” And the LORD said to Satan, “Behold, all that he has is in your hand. Only against him do not stretch out your hand.” So Satan went out from the presence of the LORD.¹¹

The devil is more powerful than any of us, probably than any other creature ever made—yet he is on a leash held by God. He is not at all an equal force contending with Yahweh in some dualistic universe. He rages against God, but cannot act outside of God’s omnipotent will.

We can imagine then that in the case of these disciples, here at the cusp of Christ’s arrest and crucifixion, he may have reasoned in heaven somewhat like this:

“Do the disciples fear God for no reason? They follow your Son only because they think he will give them bread and wealth. If Rome offered them the same, they would follow Rome, or anyone. Have you not put a hedge around them

¹¹ Vv. 6-12.

on every side, and given them powers of the age to come? They are not in this for you, but for yours. Stretch out your hand and strike the shepherd, snatch away their prospect of an earthly kingdom now, and they will curse you to your face, and all go back to fishing and pay Jesus no more mind.”

This may well have been something of the demand, something of the request to sift these disciples. Sifting was done to separate the true and useful kernels of wheat from the chaff—the exact practice of sifting we do not fully know, this word “sift” appears only here in the New Testament, but the purpose is obvious and so is the picture. Satan expects to shake these men up and send them scattering, proving them false disciples just like so many others, and stamping out the embers of the Jesus movement from its start.

And it seems, at first glance, that God granted him his request. One of the Twelve betrays Jesus and hangs himself, another denies three times that he knows him, and the rest run away. Where are the twelve crosses that should have sat on the hill next to Jesus’ cross? It seems the Twelve were sifted and found to be chaff—Peter included.

But it only seems that way until you get to the next verse, verse 32: “but I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned again, strengthen your brothers.”

A very important but often overlooked doctrine of Scripture is the doctrine of Christ’s intercession. For what Jesus says he did for Peter, Scripture says he does for all his followers. He prays for us. He intercedes for us. And that is what makes our response to failure, ultimately, different from everyone else’s.

The word “Satan” literally means “opponent,” and the word “devil” literally means “slanderer” or “accuser.” Satan continues opposing and accusing us, even before the throne of the Almighty. What hope do we have? What is our legal representation in that court where final decisions are made concerning our eternal destinies?

Paul answers in Romans 8:34: “Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died—more than that, who was raised—who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us.” Interceding—that means Jesus is speaking on our behalf.

Of course, the Father favors us and does not inherently need his Son to intercede for us, in an absolute sense, yet he does so in part at least for the sake of our comfort. Satan accuses in a real way; we take comfort in our defense attorney, who defends us on the basis of his own blood.

This is how we handle failures—we repent, and then with confidence we trust in our defense attorney. The devil will hurl his accusations quickly and deftly, as one who has practiced over the ages. But he has no chance against the one who represents us. This is why we can stand up after we stumble with a sure confidence, and continue walking forward.

Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.¹²

Our high priest intercedes for us, just as he interceded for Simon. And what happened as a consequence of his prayers for Simon, shall happen also for us: “I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned again, strengthen your brothers.”

When Simon is sifted, his faith does not fail. He fails, no doubt. But not ultimately, and not finally. He stumbles, but he is not cast head long. Simon does become Peter, a rock in the church, as the first twelve chapters of Acts make clear.

This is why, when we fail as Christians, we grieve but not as those who do not have hope. We mourn with a mourning unto repentance, not unto death. We know our faith will hold out against the onslaught of temptations and accusations against us. And the sifting that the devil intended to blow us away like chaff, will in fact blow away the impurities of our faith, refining us for further and better service. The devil wildly swings to chop us off like branches from the vine—but Jesus intends it as a pruning, that we may bear more fruit.

¹² Heb. 4:14-16.

Conclusion

How then do you handle failure? Let it be like this.

We do not despair, because we have a high priest who intercedes for us, so that our faith will not and cannot fail. We will continue on.

We do not deaden ourselves to the opinion and critique of others, and we do not blindly justify ourselves when we are wrong, because we learn from Peter's example to be careful when we think we stand firmly.

And if these motivations are not sufficient to turn us back to Christ and propel us forward again on the path of discipleship, then this final motivation is advanced in our text: "when you have turned again, strengthen your brothers."

I do not doubt that many, many men crouched in trenches during World War II felt pangs of despair, pangs of grief, perhaps even fear that they were failing or might lose the war. But in almost every case, these men kept fighting? Why? One reason was this: for the other men in the trench with them. Or what is more, for their families and friends back home, who would suffer if they gave up.

You must consider your own failures and setbacks in just the same light. If you are of the sort who spirals downward into yourself when you fail, so that you lose heart and can hardly find the strength to stand again, then let this at least get you to your feet: the devil will not wait for you to regain your composure before he continues his assault on your brothers and sisters. The longer you delay, the longer they must maintain the fight without your gifts to aid them.

What are you waiting for? Has Jesus not prayed for you? Does he not offer his prayers even now, refuting every vile tactic of the enemy in heaven's court? Then you are innocent and cleared to reenter the fray.

Turn again, and strengthen the brothers.