

FIVE FORKS BRETHREN IN CHRIST CHURCH
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SERMON: “Coming of Age – Through Failure”

(Acknowledgement to Luke Keefer Jr. and his book Everything Necessary as the primary source material for this message.)

Good morning! For those of you who don't know me, I'm Bill, one of the Pastors here at Five Forks, and I'm glad for this opportunity to worship Jesus with you this morning.

Would you happen to be familiar with the phrase, **Coming of Age**? What do you think it means? It's what we say when somebody grows up...they come of age. We're almost always talking about growing up physically, but you and I are looking to come of age in the spiritual realm as well.

You and me, we're looking to grow up...to understand and to experience what Jesus is doing in our lives and what He's doing in the world around us. And many of us can point to people or events that have played a role in our growing up and coming of age...there are many ways that we mature. This morning we're going to be looking at one way that might surprise you, and that is how we mature and grow through **Failure**.

Sound like fun? Probably not, because just that one word can stir up all kinds of memories that we'd just as soon forget.

I look back over my life and could start putting together a pretty lengthy list of failures. A lot of these would be minor, where I wouldn't involve thumbing my nose at God, it would just be those times when I failed to handle things well, I look back and wish I would have handled things differently.

Of course there were plenty of times when my failures carried pretty severe consequences. I remember losing a job when I was 22 years, and rightly so...it was on me. I can still remember sitting there and being told by my supervisor that I was being “terminated”. It’s funny how words can cut and stick...and while you can call it all kinds of things...terminated, fired, let go...whatever you call it, failure is exactly what it feels like.

Unfortunately, our experience with failure isn’t limited to our past, some of us are feeling like failures right now...in our relationships, or when it comes to following through on commitments we made...”I’m going to get this much sleep...get this much exercise...save this much money.”

Some of us even project failure into our future, convincing ourselves we have no chance of ever being successful when it comes to the things we hope for.

And, isn’t it true that many of us have experienced or are experiencing failure as we look to be followers of Jesus. *“Why am I not able to stop doing what I know is wrong? Why am I afraid to share my story of following Jesus with others?”*

The good news, if you want to call it that, is that we’re all in this together...failure is not something “you” experience or “you” experience, but it’s something we *all* experience.

And so here’s what we’re going to be doing...going to start out by just looking at some **Common Failures** that most of us can relate to. Then I’m going to share with you several short stories. We all like a good story don’t we? Well, what I’m actually going to be sharing are some stories of **God Working Through Failure**...and then, very important: **What God Has Taught Us Through Our Failures**.

So first, let’s talk about a few...

1. COMMON FAILURES

...and see if you can relate to any of these:

Lack of Integrity (When we outright lie...or even when we deceive by not telling the whole story...or when we knowingly manipulate – (false flattery for instance) to suit our own purposes).

Self-Pity (“Nobody cares, nobody understands”...when people *do* care, when people *are* trying to understand. Or we have this tendency to see life as all about us.)

Adultery (Just in case you’re saying “Not me, I can’t relate to this one”...remember, Jesus says if you lust after someone else’s spouse in your heart, you’ve committed adultery)

Murder (Again, Jesus says if you look upon someone else with contempt in your heart, it carries the same weight as murder)

Blaming/Accusing God (“Jesus... why don’t you do something? Can’t you see what I see?”)

Lack of Prayer/Spiritual Discernment (We unknowingly put on blinders, oblivious to what is unfolding around us. “Temptation? What temptation?”)

These are all pretty common, are they not? Some of these - lying, adultery, murder – would involve outright disobedience. Some of these, not so much, instead fall into that category of “I wish I would have done that, handled that, differently.”

Either way, what I’d like to do now is share with you some stories...some stories of men and women who’ve had first-hand experience with failure in these areas I’ve just listed. And we’ll come to discover some pretty good news: These are men and women who we hold up as faithful men and women of God.

But that’s not the good news, we don’t rejoice in other people’s failure in order to feel better about own. No, the good news is that in spite of their failure, God never gave up on them. Instead, He worked *through* their failures in order to bring them “come of age”...wiser, more mature...better able to understand and experience His work in their lives and in the world around them.

So, some stories of...

2. GOD WORKING THROUGH FAILURE

What do you know about...

Abraham

Man of great faith right? But it took some time for him to get there.

His wife, Sarai was said to be quite beautiful, and so there was this one occasion where Abraham became convinced these men would want to sleep with her, and he was afraid, that as her husband, they would kill him in order to do so.

So **he lied**, and told Sarai to lie as well...

Genesis 12:11b “**Say you are my sister, so that I will be treated well for your sake and my life will be spared because of you.**”

What he’s doing is offering his wife to these other men. “She’s my sister. Here, she’s yours.” There was all kinds of fallout that came about because of his deceit. And yet Abraham turns around and does the *exact* same thing years later. “Here’s ‘my sister’...all yours.” Again, with all kinds of fallout.

But **God never gives up on Abraham**, in spite of his many failures. And over time Abraham’s understanding and his faith grew to the point where we hold him up as an example of one with great faith.

What do you know about...

Elijah

His story is compelling. I think about the time he taunted and humiliated the false prophets who worshiped a lifeless god called Baal. On that day, God displayed His presence and His power in a way that was undeniable, causing all of the people to cry out together: “*The Lord...He is God! The Lord...He is God!*”

And yet, it was right after this incredible display that fear and then **self-pity** overtook Elijah and for some reason, he came to believe that he was the only one left who stood for God. It wasn’t disobedience as much as it was failing to trust that God really was in control.

God’s response is interesting...Even though He already knows the answer, He does some probing...

I Kings 19:9b-11a “What are you doing here, Elijah?” He replied, “I have been very zealous for the LORD God Almighty. The Israelites have rejected your covenant...I am the only one left, and now they are trying to kill me too.”

But **God doesn't give up on Elijah**, he speaks to him in a gentle whisper, letting him know that he *wasn't* the only one left...reassuring him and letting him know that there was still work to do.

God's response helped Elijah to take his eyes off of himself, and turn his eyes and his heart back toward God.

What do you know about...

David

King of Israel. Described as “a man after God's own heart.” And yet with David, we get a “two-for” ...**adultery and murder**. As king, he sleeps with another man's wife. And then to ensure this man's death on the battlefield, gives these instructions...

II Samuel 11:15b “Put Uriah (the woman's husband) **on the front line where the fighting is fiercest. Then withdraw from him so he will be struck down and die.**”

Talk about failure. And yet **God won't give up on David** either. Instead, He confronts him about what He has done, and give David credit, here's part of his confession...

Psalms 51:1,12 “Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love; according to your great compassion blot out my transgression. Restore to me the joy of your salvation and grant me a willing spirit to sustain me.”

And God's love *does* turn out to be **unfailing**, and His compassion *does* turn out to be **great**...as David's sins were forgiven and he remains on the throne.

What do you know about...

Martha and Mary

Sisters, right? Close friends of Jesus. They've had Jesus in their home, sat at his feet...they *know* Him. They also have a brother, that is, they *had* a brother, Lazarus, but he recently died. And the sisters put the **blame** on Jesus, holding Him responsible. When Jesus arrives in town a few days after Lazarus has passed, here's how Martha greets Him....

John 11:21 “Lord,” Martha said to Jesus, “if you had been here, my brother would not have died.”

Mary comes along a bit later and says the exact same.

What they're saying is, “*Lord, you could have done something... You could have prevented this. But you didn't.*”

How does the One that these sisters call “Lord”, and rightly so, handle it when He is called out, accused, blamed? They *know* Him, they've seen His compassion, they've seen His heart. Well, **Jesus doesn't give up on them.** He *speaks* to Martha, assuring her that her brother will rise again. And He *cries* with Mary.

He meets them right where they are. You see, this isn't disobedience on their part, this is simply failing to realize that there is more to it than they can see.. *Jesus is up to something here.* It's understandable, they're trying to work through the pain. But out of this will come a lesson they will never forget...Jesus *is* going to raise their brother Lazarus from the dead. And their understanding and their experience of Jesus working in their lives and in the world around them will grow tremendously.

Last one....what do you know about...

Peter

Jesus' best friend? Leader of the early church. But just like with Abraham, it wasn't pretty early on. There was a time where Jesus uses some interesting language in an attempt to warn Peter...

Luke 22:31b ...Satan has asked to sift you as wheat.”

What does that mean? Jesus is saying, *“He intends to crush you Peter. And have your faith blow away like chaff in the wind.”* Jesus goes on to say, *“But I’m praying for you Peter, that your faith will not fail.”*

I’m not sure how seriously Peter took Jesus’ words of warning. I do know that the night of His arrest in the garden of Gethsemane, Jesus warned Peter once again...

Matthew 26:41 “Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation.”

And within hours, coming face to face with his own possible arrest, Peter denies that he even knows Jesus.

Now think about that for a minute. Think about whoever you consider to be your very best friend. Now think about this: How would you feel if, in order to avoid serious trouble, your best friend denied knowing you?

I imagine no matter how hard you tried to understand, the hurt and sense of betrayal would be significant. And so what does Jesus do here? *“If you don’t know me, then I don’t know you.”* No. **Jesus will not give up on Peter.** He will forgive Peter and restore the relationship they once had.

All of this to say, throughout the Scriptures, we see men and women failing just like you and I. And what else have we seen besides their failure? We see that God never gives up on them.

And **God will not give up on you either.**

And so let’s take these last few minutes and look to apply – put into practice - what God has shown us through these stories.

Because this morning’s message is not about failure, but about the incredible grace of God, and how **He takes our failures and uses them to teach us valuable lessons** (*advance the slide here for point 3 below*) about us...and about Him.

3. WHAT GOD HAS TAUGHT US THROUGH OUR FAILURES

God has used past failures to teach us...

A. The Danger of Spiritual Apathy (laziness)

I love sports and like many of you, I have my favorite teams. There are times when my team goes on a winning streak where they win 2, 4, 6, 8, 10 games in row. Some of them are blowouts, some of the wins are close. And sometimes, just when it seems as if my team is about to lose and the winning streak is about to end, they somehow find a way to come from behind and pull it out in the end and keep the streak alive.

The longer a winning streak goes, the more confident you become. My team behind late in the game? *“Doesn’t matter, we’ll come back, we’ve done it before.”* You have this feeling of invincibility...that you’re never going to lose.

Until you do.

And on more than one occasion, I’ve seen my team follow up a long winning streak with an equally long losing streak because they couldn’t seem to handle the sudden adversity. When they were getting all the breaks and everything seemed to be going their way, it became easy to stop paying attention to the little things and began taking success for granted.

In the same way, as followers of Jesus, we sometimes get on a roll. Relationships, job, finances...it’s all good. We’re involved in ministry, we feel that God is using us, and that feels good. And we begin to think that this is just the way life is..and this is how it’s always going to be. Until it isn’t.

Look at Peter. He’s got the Messiah right there with him. Working together, playing together, eating together, praying together. What could possibly go wrong?

“I don’t know this man you’re talking about.”

(Mark 14:71b)

Peter's betrayal of Jesus, his failure taught him a hard but valuable lesson. He had let down his guard. He was so confident when he told Jesus hours earlier that " *Even if everybody else deserts you, I never will.*" And later that night, when Jesus warned him about the coming temptation and urged him to pray, he couldn't stay awake.

His overconfidence and lack of discernment led to a gut-wrenching failure, but at the same time taught him a lesson he would never forget.

Like Peter, some of us have experienced gut-wrenching failures. Caught up in a web of lies...overtaken by self-centeredness to the point that people grew weary of being around us...the thoughts we would entertain in our minds leaving us feeling totally worthless. It would not be uncommon for some of us to look back and see that these failures occurred when spiritual apathy set in.

Gathering with other Believers, sharing and hearing stories of God working in lives and in the world...the encouragement...being challenged...gathering together became less of a priority.

Studying and discussing the Scriptures became less of a priority. Meaningful conversations with Jesus became less of a priority. And we ended up paying a price.

It was a hard lesson for some of us to learn, but we learned from this failure and have grown as a result of this failure because God never gave up on us. And we've committed to not allowing spiritual apathy to set in ever again.

Another valuable lesson that God has taught us through failure is...

B. The Importance of Breaking the Spiral of Defeat

Like I said, my favorite teams have gone on long losing streaks, when it feels like we'll never win again. Even when it looks like my team is actually going to pull one out, in the back of my mind I'm thinking, "*How are we going to find a way to blow this one?*"

The same thing can happen to us as followers of Jesus. We fail, and find that certain sins have become habitual. The repeated failure can be so discouraging, and it just seems to pave the way for another round of failure. We come to see failure as inevitable.

But some have learned how to break the spiral of defeat, to interrupt the failure in other words.

And here's how some have learned how to do it.

First, just like Jesus warned Peter, we hear Jesus' telling us that Satan would love nothing better than to convince you that you're nothing more than a hypocrite...failure is inevitable...so give up and give in.

But that's not all we hear from Jesus...we also hear Him saying that He's praying for us, and helping us to see, that no, we're not hypocrites. We might have been struggling in this or that area, but it does not mean that our faith in Jesus isn't real.

David, realized that in spite of the adultery, in spite of the murder...he really did love God, and so confessed and asked God to help him find what he had before...the joy of salvation and a willing spirit.

Peter, instead of going back to his boat to catch fish, realized that in spite of his denial, in spite of his betrayal, knew that he really did love Jesus and repented and was restored.

Some of us, after failing miserably when it came to our thought life – sometimes lust, sometimes contempt - Jesus helped us to put a stop to the downward spiral when we came to realize that we really do love Him...we confess and seek His help. And He *does* help, because of His unfailing love and His great compassion.

Through our failures, God also teaches us...

C. The Importance of Self-Discovery

I remember when I was a kid, there would be these times when I would begin to feel lightheaded, weak, and in some extreme cases, would get a bit clammy. When this would happen, I would find myself craving food...so I'd grab some cookies or better yet, fix myself a bowl of cereal, and I'd be good.

Became more common as an adult, and eventually I had it checked out, ran some tests, and my doctor told me that I have something called hypoglycemia, where my blood sugar will bottom out after eating certain foods. It was a moment of self-discovery when it came to my physical condition. God knew it all along of course, but I had to discover it as well in order to do something about it.

Some of you have had your own moments of self-discovery when it comes to your physical health...you might have issues with gluten, salt or sugar, and this discovery causes you to adjust and do something about it.

It works much the same way in our spiritual life. Over time, through failure, God helps us to see what He knew all along...areas where we are vulnerable, where we habitually give in to temptation. For instance, if we follow sports and we found ourselves shouting at the refs, or screaming at the screen, or taking a loss out on the family...God helps us to see what we've become, and we make the hard choice of taking a step back because as followers of Jesus, this is not who we want to be.

If we find ourselves watching shows or movies where images or themes or words impact our hearts and minds...God helps us to see the inevitable failure that comes from this...and it has led many followers of Jesus to take a step back, because this is not the person that they want to be.

The thing about failure is that it will sometimes bring about an openness to God and to His voice. Here is another part of David's prayer of confession, and one that many have used and you may find yourself using in times of failure..

Psalm 51:6,10 “Surely you desire truth in the inner parts; you teach me wisdom in the inmost place. Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me.”

David is praying for God to help him discover and come to grips with whatever lies inside him. Failure has caused some of us to do the same. And whatever it is that needs dealt with, whatever it means that we take a step back from...it may seem impossible, just too painful to even consider. But for those who make the adjustment, they look back on some painful failure in his or her life and praise God for it, because of the positive change that it brought about.

One last lesson that God teaches us through our failure...

D. The Importance of Trusting Jesus

Like Abraham we have lied and deceived.

Like Elijah we have been overtaken by self-pity.

Like David we have had feelings of lust and contempt in our hearts.

Like Martha and Mary we have accused Jesus of not caring, blaming Him for doing nothing when something big needed done.

Like Peter we became weak in our prayer life and lacking in spiritual discernment.

But one thing we've seen from Scripture and many of us have experienced in our own lives, Jesus does not give up on us in our failure, He is all about forgiveness, reconciliation and restoration. He can be trusted, even in the midst of failure.

The truth is, Jesus can handle our failures better than we can...the only thing that can go wrong is if we allow our failures to cause us to give up and give in. If we find ourselves unable or unwilling to trust Jesus to help us learn and grow from our failures...then it will be very difficult for us to come of age and experience all that He has in store for us.

Here's the analogy that Luke Keefer Jr. gives...he says, ***"It is virtually impossible to keep your balance on a bicycle when it is standing still. But if it's moving, balance is quite easily maintained. Likewise, God can guide and correct us while we're moving in our Christian life, but we lose our balance when we stand still. Trust gets us in motion for God and lets Him keep us on course."***

It's one very, very important lesson that failure has taught us. Jesus can be trusted. We just have to keep moving...pursuing Him by gathering, studying, praying. We just have to keep moving.

That is my prayer for all of us here this morning...that we will keep moving, embracing the valuable lessons that God has taught us through our failure, and by doing so, He helps us to grow, to mature, to come of age.