



A Spiritual Encouragement Message
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Turning Failure into Faithfulness

(Text: Luke 22:31-33)

by Randall Jarrell

I want to talk to you about why good men sometimes fail. (Example of John Farrell and Hugh Liddle). I do not bring up those examples simply to bemoan the fact that spiritual leaders fall into sin. That much is evident from a simple reading of the Bible. There is Noah who got drunk, Abraham who lied about his wife, Moses who murdered an Egyptian, and of course there is David who committed adultery and then had a man murdered to cover up his sin. The question I am asking is this: Why do such things happen? Why do good men to fall in to sin - and what are we to learn from this?

I'm sure we all know one answer already. Good men fall into sin so that the rest of us will learn not to make the same stupid mistake. That's true, of course. How many of us have heard bad news about a friend and said, "There but for the grace of God go I?" I have said that to myself many times - and so have you. It's perfectly true that we can all take a lesson from the mistakes of others - and if we don't, we may find ourselves wishing we had.

But there is much more to be learned and that is the reason for my message. I want us to take a look at the story of Peter who three times denied his Lord. Perhaps the place to begin is with a simple reading of the text. Listen to these words of Jesus spoken to Peter on the night before he was crucified. "Simon, Simon, Satan has asked to sift you as wheat. But I have prayed for you, Simon, that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned back, strengthen your brothers" (Luke 22:31-32). These words must have seemed strange to Peter, coming as it were out of the blue. It has been well remarked that Peter in many ways is the most human of all the disciples. He constantly gets in trouble because he blurts out the stuff everyone else is thinking but doesn't have the guts to say. He is the man with the foot-shaped mouth, constantly promising more than he can deliver.

This night is no exception. When he hears these words of Jesus, he knows without being told that they contain a great rebuke - a prediction of personal failure that must have seemed impossible. But Peter is nothing if not brave at heart, so he replies foolishly but honestly, "Lord, I am ready to go with you to prison and to death" (Luke 22:33). He did not know that years later he would keep that promise. But not that night. As he uttered those words, his moment of greatest personal failure - the blot that 2000 years cannot remove from his record - his threefold denial of Christ was less than five hours away.

Ponder the words of Jesus for a moment, "But when you have turned back." The King James says it this way, "But when you are converted." Some people have stumbled over that statement, but I think it is entirely accurate. The words of our Lord hang in the air with a message we need to hear. It is entirely possible to be an unconverted Christian. Peter was saved but in some deep sense he was not yet fully converted to the Master's use - and that explains his tragic failure.

From this text I'd like to share with you four important principles that help us understand why good men fall and what we can learn from it.

I. No Christian man is beyond the possibility of real moral failure.

There is a mortal enemy of your soul who would destroy you if he could.

This point is so obvious that I imagine no one would argue against it. Jesus told Peter that Satan desired to "sift" him like wheat. One translation says, "Satan has demanded" while another says, "Satan has claimed the right" to sift you. That thought may shock some of you because it is sometimes said that Satan has no authority over the Christian. That's true in one sense because we know Satan can do nothing without God's express permission. Martin Luther said that the devil is "god's devil," meaning that he ultimately serves God's purpose in the universe. But he also said that this world is filled with devils who threaten to undo us. In this day and age, it's easy to become unbalanced regarding Satan and his work. But let our text speak with a full voice. There is a mortal enemy of your soul who would destroy you if he could. Peter never forgot the words of Jesus that fateful night, and many years later he said it this way, "Be self-controlled and alert. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour" (1 Peter 5:8). We are fools if we do not take these words seriously.

I say that simply to point out that sin comes to all of us in many different ways, and we dare not take anything for granted.

II. Satan often attacks us at the point of our strength, not at the point of our weakness.

After all, had not Peter boldly said, "Even if all fall away, I will not" (Mark 14:29)? If you had asked Peter six hours earlier to name his strong points, no doubt he would have listed boldness and courage right at the top. He would have said, "Sometimes I put my foot in my mouth, but at least I'm not afraid to speak up. Jesus knows that I'll always be there when he needs me."

But when Satan attacked, it came so suddenly, so swiftly, so unexpectedly that the “bold apostle turned to butter. ”By himself Peter is helpless. In the moment of crisis, Peter failed at the very point where he pledged to be eternally faithful.

Should this surprise us? After all, why should Satan attack only at the point of your self-perceived weakness? If you know you have a weakness, that’s the very area you will guard most carefully. If you know you have a problem with anger or with laziness or with lust or with gluttony, will you not be on your guard lest you fall? But it is not so with your strengths. You tend to take those areas for granted. You say, “That’s not a problem for me. I have other problems, but that area is not really a temptation at all.”

Watch out! Put up the red flag! There is danger ahead. When a person takes any area of life for granted, that’s the one area Satan is most likely to attack. Why? Because that’s the one area where you aren’t watching for his attack.

It happened to Peter. It will happen to you and to me sooner or later.

III. When we fail it strips away our excessive self-confidence.

Never again would Peter brag on himself like he did that night. Never again would he presume to be better than his brothers. Never again would he be so cocky and self-confident. All that was gone forever, part of the price Peter paid for his failure in the moment of crisis. By falling flat on our faces we are forced to admit that without the Lord we can do nothing but fail. The quicker we learn that the better off we will be. Failure never seems to be a good thing when it happens, but if failure strips away our cocky self-confidence, then failure is a good thing.

Never again would Peter stand up and boast about his courage. In the future he would talk about humility instead.

IV. God can redeem your mistakes if you will let him.

I notice two encouraging facts about the way Jesus treated Peter: 1) He never criticized him and, 2) He never gave up on him. Jesus knew about Peter’s denial long before it happened. He knew what Peter would do, he knew how he would react, and he knew the kind of man Peter would be afterward. That’s why he said, “When you have turned back.” Not if ... but when! He knew that Peter’s heart was good, he knew after his terrible sin he would return to the Lord. Isn’t that wonderful? Jesus has more faith in Peter than Peter has in Jesus. He knew that Peter had important work to do - “Strengthen your brothers” - but it couldn’t happen without his fall and his restoration to the Lord. It had to happen that way or else Peter would never be fully effective for Christ. There is an important principle at work here. A bone that is broken often becomes stronger after it is healed. Something in the healing process actually makes the break point stronger than it was before. The same is true of a rope that breaks. In the hands of a master splicer, the rope once repaired becomes stronger than it was before. The same thing is true of our failures. God can touch our broken places and make us stronger than we were before. Though we fall and fall and fall, and

though our faces are covered with the muck and grime of bitter defeat, by God's grace we can rise from the field of defeat to march on to new victory.

That's what happened to Peter. His guilt was turned into grace; his shame into sympathy; his failure into faithfulness. *Here is the proof: Peter did much more for Jesus Christ after his fall than he did before. Before his fall, he was loud, boisterous and unreliable; afterward he became a flaming preacher of the gospel. Before, he was a big talker; afterward, he talked only of what Jesus Christ could do for others. He was the same man, but he was different. He was still Peter through and through, but he had been sifted by Satan, and in the sifting the chaff of his life had been blown away.*

This is what Peter lost in his failure:

His vanity

His pride

His self-confidence

His rash impulsiveness

His unreliability

This is what Peter gained after his restoration:

Humility

New confidence in God

Tested courage

New determination to serve Jesus Christ

A willingness to use his experience to help others

The things Peter lost he didn't really need; the things he gained couldn't have come any other way.

There is much in this story to encourage us. It was not the real Peter who denied the Lord; it was the real Peter who followed him into the courtyard. It was not the real Peter who cursed and swore; it was the real Peter who said, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." When the Lord looks at you and me, he sees beyond our faults to the loyalty underneath. He sees our pain, our tears, and our earnest desire to please him. He sees us in our faltering attempts to follow him.

To whom does this story apply?

First of all, to you who are being tempted, who feel the pull of circumstances conspiring to draw you away from the Lord, take heart! Do you feel weak and confused? Peter felt that way, too. Are you discouraged about your life? Peter felt discouraged, too. Do you feel backed into a corner? So did Peter. This story is for you.

Second, this story is for those who have fallen. Perhaps you gave way under pressure this week. Perhaps you carry a load of guilt from some thoughtless words spoken in haste. Perhaps you denied the Lord by keeping quiet at work when you should have spoken up. Perhaps you have used vile language this week - even if only spoken under your breath. Perhaps you have been where you ought not to have been. Perhaps you have found yourself in a relationship that you know is wrong. Take heart! Peter not only felt like you, he also fell like you.

Third, this story is for those who are coming back to God. Perhaps you know all about weeping bitter tears. Do you feel as if God is far away? Does it seem as if you are trudging across a vast desert all alone? Do you feel embarrassed and humiliated by the things you did and said that got you in the mess you're in? Take heart! Peter felt that way, too.

No story in all the Bible gives us more hope. If Peter can fall, anybody can fall. If Peter can come back, anybody can come back.

The First Law of Spiritual Progress

One final point. Where did this story come from? How did it get in the Bible? Who told this story in the first place? It could only have come from Peter. No one else was there to tell what happened. We wouldn't have done that. We hide our mistakes to make sure no one finds out about them. Not Peter. Once he was restored, he couldn't stop talking about what Jesus had done for him.

Peter still speaks to us today. "If you think you've fallen short, if you feel like you've denied him, look at what happened to me." Do not despair. God still loves you, and He loves you so much that it doesn't matter what you've done. If God can forgive Peter, he can forgive anybody. He loves you, He always has, and He always will.

There is hope for all of us - the best of us, the worst of us, and the rest of us. If you have fallen, he can pick you up again. If you are broken, he can make you whole again. If you have failed, he can make you useful again. If you have lost your courage, he can give it back to you again.