

# Strength for the Storms of Life: Dealing with Failure

March 22, 2009  
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## Matthew 14: 22-33

Grace, mercy and peace from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ. AMEN.

The young man had just graduated from college, full of energy, enthusiasm and excitement. Even though his new job was supposed to be “temporary,” the 21 year old hit the ground running. Things went well, for a while. Then, not so well. There were problems with communications, with expectations, with motivation, and with performance. Finally the boss called him in and said, “This isn’t working. I’ve set a date for your last day.” The young man was devastated! All that hard work was going down the drain and his future was looking pretty grim. He had lots of questions about WHY! He spread lots of blame around....little of it aimed at himself.... but the bottom line was this: He saw himself as a failure. Period.

During Lent we’re talking about the Storms of Life that can.... and will.... happen to all of us during the course of our lives: all the hurts, disappointments, pains and problems that we will deal with. This morning we’ll focus on a subject that we LOVE to talk about.....when they aren’t OURS, **failure!**

My “young man” story was from the Book of Mark... Nieting....that is and it was painfully true. The Book of Matthew tells another “young man” story, about Jesus’ disciple, Peter. Peter was “the man” around Jesus. He loved being in the middle of the action. Jesus had finished feeding the 5000. Peter and the disciples heading home across the Sea of Galilee. It was dark and stormy and they were scared, cold and wet when out of the mists appears Jesus, walking on the water.

Peter, who seems to open his mouth before turning on his brain, says, “*Lord, if it’s YOU, command me to come to you on the water!*” Jesus says, “*Ok, Peter, come!*” So Peter steps OUT OF THE BOAT and starts walking on the water! I doubt Peter looked at it as an experiment in Physics, but it was going well until he actually noticed WHERE he was and how big the WAVES were! That’s when he made his mistake....he took his eyes off Jesus and started sinking.

My guess is that every person in this room has wrestled with failure....some of us some significant ones. The first thing about failure is that it can make us feel rather “isolated,” so let’s level the playing field on this one. Raise your right hand if you’ve ever failed a test, been cut from a team, lost a job, slept through a sermon, eaten your salad with the wrong fork, been

inappropriately impatient with a two year old or didn't recycle your newspapers! Some of you failed this one already because you keep raising your left hand instead of your right!

If you've ever experienced academic, moral, relational, vocational, physical or even spiritual failure of ANY kind, welcome to the Failure Club! Let's turn to the people next to us, slap them on the back and say, "Hey, I've failed too!"

I believe that we've established that the storm of failure is a universal human condition. We're ALL going to fail at SOMETHING, usually more than once, and sometimes in very spectacular fashion! Nobody LIKES the feeling of failing, especially when the failures end up being painful....or even fatal. That said, there are observations we can make about "failure."

#### **OBSERVATION #1:**

*WE WILL NOT GROW WITHOUT RISKING FAILURE.* A life that is primarily arranged around avoiding failure is already a failure! If we spend all our time warm and comfortable cocoons, we're going to miss the real adventure that God has placed out there for us...where the action, and where the real ministry takes place. Remember Peter and the boys in the boat.... the boat was the comfort zone. Outside it the water was wet, the waves were big, the wind was howling and the laws of physics were working against him, but there was a 100% chance he would NOT walk on water if he didn't get out of the boat!

God is constantly calling His people to leave the comforts of our routines, to step out in faith and then to experience the JOY...the THRILL....of knowing that He and HE alone is holding us up above the waves and the storm. "*It's ME!*" says Jesus....and Peter says "*Call me to come to you!*" Can you imagine... putting one foot off the side of the boat...and then the other....and pretty soon you're walking not because YOU are so special...but because HE is so powerful!

#### **OBSERVATION #2:**

Whether Peter was walking ON the water or sinking INTO the water depended on where his attention was fixed. Peter only started sinking when he took his eyes off Jesus and started seeing just how big the waves were....and let's face it....the waves from the storms of life can get really huge, can't they? But if we focus on the waves... we won't even take the first step!

Far too often we spend our lives worrying about overwhelmed by the waves of life, huddling for safety in the bottom of the boat saying, "*Jesus, PLEASE don't call me! Call someone else!!*" I know, for instance, that many people are afraid of public speaking and would

NEVER volunteer to read Scripture in worship. If they could learn to fix their eyes on WHAT they are reading and WHO they are reading about, they wouldn't worry so much about WHO they are reading to! Taking the risk....whatever that may be....may well be worth the result, and who knows what we will learn and how we will grow when we do it.

### **OBSERVATION #3:**

Peter does sink....but did he fail? Really fail? Failure is NOT an event that happens to you, but rather, it's a judgment about the event. Jonas Salk, who discovered the polio vaccine, tried 200 things that didn't work before he was successful. Was he a 200 time failure? His words: "*I discovered 200 ways NOT to make polio vaccine!*"

The same thing happened to Thomas Edison when he invented the light bulb, except he first discovered almost 5000 ways NOT to make one!

Here's what I think about this: Peter's failure was not that he got out of the boat, but only that he took his eyes off Jesus. There were 11 bigger failures out on that lake, 11 other disciples who never set one foot over the gunnels. Their failure was that they played it SAFE. *ONLY PETER* would how it felt to walk on water, and how it would feel to have Jesus reach down and pull him back to the surface and walk with him back to the boat. *ONLY PETER* would have that memory and treasure it for the rest of his life, not as a failure, but as a lesson in trust.

Some of you here today may have failed magnificently.... I sure did! You may have accepted the label of "failure"....for many reasons, and yes...it hurts. Jesus is clear on this: keep your eyes on Him! He is totally capable of lifting you up and bringing you back to safety.....and He will, if you will only trust Him....and keep your eyes, and your life...focused on Him.

What holds us back? Far too often it's "*fear of failure!*" "How do I know that I won't fail?" is a question asked far too often....and the truth is, YOU DON'T KNOW! YOU MIGHT FAIL! WE might fail! I might fail! All this leads to:

### **OBSERVATION #4:**

*FOLLOWING JESUS CHRIST INVOLVES RISK.* It involves leaving our comfort zones.....and that's tough for almost anyone. Question: what's the top selling *CHAIR* in the US? It's called "Lazy Boy!" It's not called "Risky Boy" or "Worker Boy," it's Lazy Boy! I've got one. I LOVE to go home and sit in my Lazy Boy! There's a term for that... we say we're going to "VEG OUT" and become a form of plant life. So I can go home and become a couch potato in my Lazy Boy!

That's how I see the 11 other disciples. They were boat potatoes, afraid of taking the risk of stepping out of the boat onto the water and walking toward Jesus in the middle of the storm. The good news is that over the next two years they too learned more and more to focus their eyes on Jesus and away from the storms of life. They learned that when they were willing to risk whatever it took to make a difference in the world for Jesus and the Gospel, HE would lift them up and carry them forward....not necessarily in SAFETY, but in blessing.

Here's my final observation, and for it, I will turn back to the Gospel of Mark, Nieting, that is. My initial "failure" was painful. It made me look inside myself and who I was and how I wanted to live my life. It forced me to my knees and to the cross, seeking God's forgiveness and a second chance.....and God was willing to give me both because...

#### **OBSERVATION #5**

***JESUS CAME TO REDEEM EACH AND EVERY ONE OF US FROM THE GREATEST FAILURES OF LIFE: those of sin, death and the power of the devil. In doing this, Jesus went to the cross....something that, in earthly terms, might be called a 'total failure.' Some might even call it the "agony of defeat."***

**For Jesus the cross WAS agony, but it was the AGONY OF VICTORY ....and for those who will focus their eyes and their hearts on Him.....the cross was, and still is, the "triumph of the defeat..... of the evil one!"**

Jesus does not WANT us to stay "safe" for long. He is always looking for people....and for churches....who will take the risk and step out of their comfort zones and walk out onto the stormy waters of the world around us and "make disciples of all nations," because that's where the action is. That's where real ministry happens. That's where the hurting people are, and it's where the rescues take place. It's where the most joyful joys are felt and the greatest celebrations happen,

Friends, I see OUR congregation and I see YOU as people who are not willing to live "life in the boat." We have made a huge commitment here to bring the Hope of Jesus Christ to far more people than we can ever imagine as we expand our mission and our ministries to those who are experiencing the storms of their lives and....as of yet.....do not have their eyes on Jesus. Is it a risk? Certainly it is! Could we fail? It's possible.....but only if we take our eyes off of Jesus!

Let's take one more lesson from Peter, from Maundy Thursday's Passover Meal. "*Some of you will deny me,*" says Jesus, looking at Peter. Remember his response? "*NOT ME, JESUS, I'M THE WATER-WALKER! I'LL NEVER DENY YOU!*"

Splash comes another failure.....and once again, after His resurrection, Jesus would come face to face with Peter and offer him both forgiveness and a challenge to "*feed my lambs, feed my sheep.*"

What if Peter had said, "*No....I don't want to fail again... I'm tired of failure and I'm just going to quit!*" He would have missed the VERY reason for his entire existence on earth! He would not have written the Scriptures that strengthen us even today. But once again, Peter fixed his eyes on Jesus and off he went!

Jesus is still looking for someone else....maybe someone right here this morning... who will say, "*Well, Jesus, I may be small potatoes, but this spuds for you!*"

Next week, our last Storm of Life, that of Betrayal.