

**July 7, 2024**  
**Genesis 25:24-26**  
**Mark 6:1-13**  
**“Faith and the Wallenda Factor”**  
**Michael Stanfield**

He left that place and came to his hometown, and his disciples followed him. On the Sabbath he began to teach in the synagogue, and many who heard him were astounded. They said, “Where did this man get all this? What is this wisdom that has been given to him? What deeds of power are being done by his hands! Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?” And they took offense at him. Then Jesus said to them, “Prophets are not without honor, except in their hometown, and among their own kin, and in their own house.” And he could do no deed of power there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and cured them. And he was amazed at their unbelief.

Then he went about among the villages teaching. He called the twelve and began to send them out two by two, and gave them authority over the unclean spirits. He ordered them to take nothing for their journey except a staff; no bread, no bag, no money in their belts; but to wear sandals and not to put on two tunics. He said to them, “Wherever you enter a house, stay there until you leave the place. If any place will not welcome you and they refuse to hear you, as you leave, shake off the dust that is on your feet as a testimony against them.” So they went out and proclaimed that all should repent. They cast out many demons, and anointed with oil many who were sick and cured them.

Sometimes, despite our best intentions, despite our best laid plans, despite our very best efforts, it all falls flat.



One Sunday, very early on in my ministry, after spending hours on a sermon I had put a great deal of thought into, I preached it to what can only be described as a lackluster response at best. Halfway through it, I began to sweat as I realized no one appeared to be listening. At the end of the service, as I stood at the door shaking hands, people were, as always, gracious enough. I began to think that maybe it wasn't so bad after all. Finally, one woman, the last woman out of the sanctuary said, “Thank you, for your sermon.” I should have left well enough alone, cut my losses, and moved on. Instead, I responded, “I appreciate that. But I am thinking now that it was just too long.” The smiling woman replied, “No, it just seemed that way.”

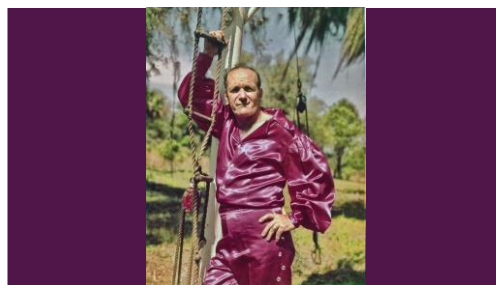


Ouch. We don't like to hear this but it's true. No matter how disciplined or organized we are, no matter how hard we work, ultimately, we are not completely in control of our successes or our failures. And to top it off, we can't always be sure that what we *experience* as a failure or a success is really either of those at all.

Our morning text tells us that despite the powerful teaching of Jesus, despite the authority of his words, despite the fact that he healed people of their infirmities, the people of his hometown of Nazareth took great offense at *him* and all he had to offer.

But the absolutely amazing thing to me is that this experience – what for most of us would surely have felt like deep personal failure – becomes for Jesus a moment that is pregnant with new possibilities. Instead of becoming discouraged, Jesus takes the biggest step of his life up to that point – he embarks on his teaching and healing ministry – and, get this – he uses the failure in his home town as a lesson for the new recruits he has just commissioned for that ministry: “If any place will not welcome you and they refuse to hear you,” says Jesus, “as you leave, shake off the dust that is on your feet as a testimony against them.” In other words, “Do as I have done, don't take it personally, shake off the dust of failure, and move on.”

It is the difference in trusting *God* regarding one's mission or one's calling in life or constantly working to ward off the possibility of failure.



The great Karl Wallenda, that you see here, spent practically his entire life on a high wire, thrilling crowds with his daring high-altitude act. That all ended in 1978 when Wallenda plunged 75 feet to his death before an audience of thousands in San Juan, Puerto Rico.



When Wallenda's widow began to sort out what might have happened that dreadful day, she noted how that recently her husband had become more and more concerned with little details of safety.



His precautions had become a preoccupation. Instead of all his energies being channeled into performing his act with passion and focus, his purpose had now become how to keep from falling.



And so out of this cautionary tale came a new label - the "Wallenda factor." The Wallenda Factor is at work in your life if you are so afraid of failure that you dwell only on the negatives and your fear of failure rules your life. C. W. Bess

I don't know about you, but I know from first-hand experience what it is like to be gripped by the Wallenda Factor. When I first got out of Seminary, I still recognized good preaching when I heard it, but actually producing it seemed all but out of my reach. When it came to preaching, I felt like a deer caught in the headlights. Of course, it didn't help that out of all of the ordination exams I took, the one I had failed was preaching. For me, trying to produce a sermon was like trying to produce a short passable essay when I hadn't a clue how to write. Every week was an

exercise in acute anxiety as I faced another week of attempting to come up with the perfect sermon. And *that*, of course, was the problem.

If your goal is to be perfect, you're a failure from the start. Because there is no such thing as perfection this side of the grave. No, when it comes to employing your God-given talents, whether it's tight-rope walking, or teaching, whether it's preaching or parenting it is really about simply faithfully performing the task with joy and abandon and letting God take care of the rest.

After all, what we perceive as less than perfect may be the human factor that God loves most and is most keen on using.



At 96 years of age, Jim Lovell seen here is an American retired astronaut, naval aviator, test pilot, and mechanical engineer. In 1968, as command module pilot of Apollo 8, he became, along with Frank Borman and William Anders, one of the first three astronauts to fly to and orbit the Moon.



He then commanded the Apollo 13 lunar mission in 1970 which included fellow astronauts, Fred Haise and Jack Swigert, seen here. As you will recall, after a critical failure en route, the three looped around the Moon and miraculously returned safely to Earth. In 1995, a film starring Tom Hanks was made of this historic averted crisis.



A graduate of the United States Naval Academy in Annapolis, Maryland, in the class of 1952, Lovell flew F2H Banshee night fighters. This included a Western Pacific deployment aboard the aircraft carrier USS Shangri-La.

Well, there was a previously recorded interview that aired in the midst of the Apollo 13 crisis, when it looked like all three aboard the Apollo 13 flight were doomed for sure. In the interview, Lovell was asked:

“Is there a specific time in an airplane emergency when you can recall being particularly afraid?”

“Well, I’ll tell you”, he said. “There was this one time when I was in a Banshee in combat conditions so there’s no running lights on the aircraft carrier. It was the Shangri la and we were over the Sea of Japan and my radar had jammed and my homing signal was gone because somebody in Japan was using the same frequency. So, it was leading me away from where I was supposed to be.

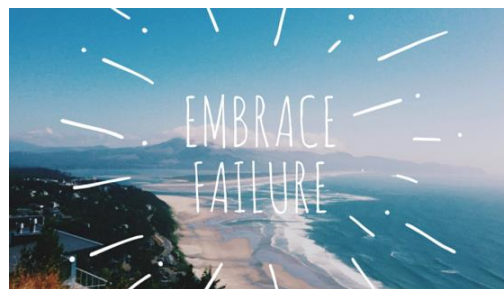
“And I’m looking down at a big black ocean. So, I flip on my map light and then suddenly, ZAP! everything shorts out – right there in my cockpit – all my instruments are gone, all my lights are gone and can’t even tell now what my altitude is.

“I know I am running out of fuel so I am thinking about ditching in the ocean and I look down there and in the darkness there’s this green trail. It’s like this long carpet that is laid out right beneath me and it was the algae right? It was that phosphorescent stuff that gets churned up in the wake of a big ship. And it was just leading me home.

“Now if my cockpit lights hadn’t shorted out there’s no way I’d ever been able to see that. So, you never know what events are going to transpire to get you home.”

Failure – with God: it can be our way home spiritually. Yet we learn fairly early on to fear failure – don’t we? I know when I was first starting out as a preacher, the thing I was worried most about was failure.

But, the thing is, as Jim Lovell reveals, it is hard to tell about failure. It *may* come because we are being *unfaithful* to the task. But it may also come precisely because we are being more faithful than we have ever been but just haven’t grown fully into what the situation we are in demands. Things do go badly. We find ourselves in a mess facing failure. Unfortunately, our culture has little or no place for the failures. It celebrates only the winners.



But central to the teaching of Jesus is that Christian disciples *embrace* failure and loss. It is part of the package. This does not mean that Jesus encouraged a kind of reserved fatalism; quite the contrary. We are to put our whole selves into whatever it is that we feel called to do.

And that's what makes failure, when it happens, so devastating. However, if we cannot accept the possibility of complete, radical, personal failure in the carrying out of our calling, (whether that is being a faithful grand-parent or a preacher) we are not really relying ultimately on God and we are not really free. We're not free to live. We're not free to love. We're not free to serve God.

Easier said than done unless we remember today's message: that the disciples of Jesus were sent into the towns to proclaim the miraculous grace of the kingdom – and that the kingdom comes by way of God's transformation of *our* understanding of failure – even failure of nerve or character.



Hear these words of Lutheran pastor, Nadia Bolz-Weber as she discusses the ultimate failure of the disciple Peter who denied his Lord not once, when his Lord needed him, but three times:

She says, “Peter knew what it meant to really screw things up and be given grace... When he denied his teacher, friend and Messiah — when he showed a complete failure of nerve the night Jesus was killed — I can only imagine the self-loathing that ensued. I can only imagine how hard it was to make eye contact with Mary Magdalene the next day. How hard it was to even get out of bed. He was in a prison of his own making and needed to be freed. He needed someone with the keys to let him out. He didn't need a therapist or a new elimination diet or a book on the power of positive thinking.

“He needed forgiveness. He needed the kind of encouragement that can only come from grace.

“The church of Jesus Christ could only be built on a failure (like Peter) who knew what it felt like to be in that much need of God and God's forgiveness for the misunderstanding and mismanagement of God's gifts.”

Bolz-Weber goes on: “I just want to make a case,” she says, “for the church not forgetting that living out our faith is deeply connected to confessing our need for grace...”

“We are bound by our failures and missteps and the words we said in our worst moments. They form the bars in our spiritual prison cells. And we gotta take the keys (of the kingdom) out

whenever we can and free each other — remind each other that we are living now by God’s grace, not by other’s judgement.

“We need to be loosed. Loosed from that which weighs us down, our sin, shame, and despair. Loosed from our pride, anger, resentment and guilt for not being able to live up to even our own calling and our own values.” Nadia Bolz-Weber, “Confession and Cancellation: a sermon on Forgiveness,” August 23, 2020. <https://nadiabolzweber.substack.com/p/confession-and-cancellation>.



What could be more freeing than knowing that God is in control and that through Christ, God is behind us no matter how big our failure. It is really the best news of all because it means that *our* perceived failures may actually be *God’s* victories. I know it’s how I kept on preaching even when I felt I was a failure at it.

The point here is for us not to allow the letdowns surrounding the things we feel passionately about poison our attitude towards our zest for living. It is so easy to do these days because there is so much ignorance, negativity, callousness, and cruelty that is spread through social media regularly every day and is being swallowed as the gospel by a large portion of our population. But, when we feel defeated, we are to get back on our feet, redirect our energy towards our calling, and find a friend or a set of friends for support.

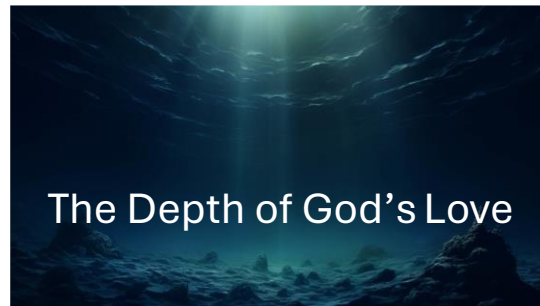
There are tremendous disappointments and terrible failures that come directly as a result of following what we believe God is calling us to be and do, but that reality doesn’t necessarily reflect the long-range plan of God.

When we feel discouraged:  
1. Remember God is in control and  
2. People are gonna do what they are gonna do. What they do is out of your control.

When we feel discouraged, we need to keep two things in mind:

- (1) God is still sovereign and
- (2) People are gonna do what they are gonna do and *what* they do is out of your control.

This should free us from being obsessed with trying to control everything in our life and our calling as Christians. It should free us from the fear of not being perfect. We need to try to grow through the pain of defeat and remember that nothing is accomplished without risk.



We need to especially remember in times of deeply personal defeat that God's love for us is even deeper. How deep is God's love for us? How deep is God's forgiveness for us? How deep is God's power for us? How deep will God really go?

All the way down. You may be struggling with things bigger than you are, things bigger than your family is, things bigger than all of us put together.

But however far down you've gone in mismanaging your life, messing up your marriage, misjudging God's plan, ruining your reputation, compromising your morals, stifling your imagination – dragging your soul, drugging your mind, or wrecking your body, one thing is true and it is the final word given by Jesus on this earth: "Lo I am with you always – even to the end of the earth." Let us pray:

Gracious God, in all our personal failures and defeats, help us to remember that you are sovereign and that you have a mysterious plan for us that is better than anything we could conceive. Amen