

INTRODUCTION

This is the fourth message in the series from 1 Thessalonians which I've entitled, "Finding Hope in a Hopeless World." In this message we're going to talk about "How God Turns Failure into Favor."

I don't even know if kids in school take home report cards anymore, but when I was growing up, the teachers gave us report cards to take home, and one of our parents had to sign it. Billy brought his report card home. Unfortunately, it had a couple of "F's" on it. He brought it to his dad and said, "Dad, here's my report card along with a couple of your old report cards I found in the attic."

I never really understood those letter grades. We all know "F" stands for fail. But F was the only letter grade that stood for something. "A" stood for excellent, not awesome. "B" was good, not beautiful. "C" meant average, not complacent. And "D" meant poor instead of despicable. And then they skipped from D to F. Can't you just imagine Jerry Seinfeld doing a routine about this? He'd ask, "Would somebody tell me what ever happened to E? Why did they just skip E and go to from D to F?"

You might not have ever had an "F" on a report card, but chances are you've failed at something in your life. If you have never failed at anything you've ever attempted, then you can get up and leave early for lunch because this message is only for those of us who have failed in the past and will fail again in the future.

Imagine for a moment I came to preach here at Green Acres. Someone found out I had been in jail in the last city where I preached. They form a mob committed to running me out of town. They stir up opposition to me. I preach here only three weeks, and the pressure gets so hot, that in the middle of the night, I load my family in my car, and we leave town. Most people would consider that a failure.

That's exactly what happened to Paul. He came to Thessalonica from Philippi where he had been beaten and thrown in jail. With the wounds on his back still tender, he preached in Thessalonica for only three weeks. A mob formed to oppose him. They looked for him and Silas to drag them out into the streets to stone them. But Paul and Silas hid. But in the middle of the night, they snuck out of Thessalonica and headed to Berea. After he preached in Berea a few weeks, the mob in Thessalonica followed him there and stirred up a mob against Paul. He had to leave again and this time he headed to Athens.

1 Thessalonians 2:1-5. "You know, brothers, that our visit to you was not a failure. We had previously suffered and been insulted in Philippi, as you know, but with the help of our God we dared to tell you his gospel in spite of strong opposition. For the appeal we make does not spring from error or impure motives, nor are we trying to trick you. On the contrary, we speak as men approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel. We are not trying to please men but God, who tests our hearts. You know we never used flattery, nor did we put on a mask to cover up greed—God is our witness."

By many standards, Paul's visit to Thessalonica could be called a failure. He only preached there for three weeks; then he was run out of town. But Paul is a great example of how God can turn our failures into His failure.

Where have there been failures in your life? Maybe you've gone through the heartache of a failed marriage or a failed job; you got fired, or were asked to resign. You might have applied for a scholarship or a job, and gotten turned down. You might be suffering from failing health, or you might have experienced a financial failure. Maybe you feel you failed as a parent or you failed in a business venture. For all of us who have ever failed, or will fail in the future, there are four lessons we can learn about overcoming failure.

1. FAILURE DOESN'T HAVE TO BE FATAL

After his introductory remarks, Paul was quick to say, "Our visit to you was not a failure." Now why do you think he wrote that? I think it was because there were some of his enemies who were claiming his visit to Thessalonica was an abject failure.

At the time it happened, I'm sure Paul was disappointed. Nobody enjoys getting run out of town. But with the perspective of time, Paul insisted what most people would call a failure had been turning into something good by God's power. A lesser man would have probably given up on preaching after being arrested, beaten, and then run out of two cities. But Paul kept on preaching.

The truth is all of us fail at one time or another. But failure doesn't have to define you. Just because you have failed, it doesn't make you a failure. The Bible says, "For though a righteous man falls seven times, he rises again, but the wicked are brought down by calamity." (Proverbs 24:16)

Even righteous, good people will fall and fail. But the righteous person gets up and keeps on trying. When a wicked person stumbles, they stay down. A wicked person stumbles and stays down.

The Bible reads like a who's who of failures. Hebrews 11 has often been called the roll call of faith, but it could also be called the roll call of failures. Abraham lied about Sarah being his wife. Jacob and his mother Rebecca lied to Isaac in order to steal the blessing that belonged to Esau. Moses killed a man and because he lost his temper he failed to enter the Promised Land.

Jesus had two disciples who failed him, but there was a big difference. Judas betrayed the Lord. He failed in his commitment to Jesus. But Judas felt only remorse, and he never repented.

Simon Peter had boasted to Jesus, "These other disciples may forsake you, but I never will." But Peter failed to live up to his promise. He denied the Lord three times. But he repented and was restored by Jesus.

My friend, John Maxwell, has written many books on leadership. He says: "Failing doesn't mean I'm a failure; it just means I have not yet succeeded. It doesn't mean I've accomplished nothing; it just means I've learned something. It doesn't mean I've been a fool; it just means I've had the

courage to take a risk. It doesn't mean God has abandoned me; it just means He has a better idea!"

Remember, failure isn't final and it isn't fatal. God can bring you back from failure.

2. FAILURE CAN BE THE FERTILIZER FOR SUCCESS

Since being run out of town, Paul had come to understand God's purpose for his life. He wrote, "We speak as men approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel." God has given to us a very valuable resource—the gospel. He has entrusted it to us. Many banks and financial institutions have a trust department. When you donate your money to a trust, you expect it to be managed well. Paul was the kind of man who learned from his mistakes.

Author Jim Stovall observed: "Conventional wisdom might tell us that people who succeed never fail and failures never succeed. Nothing could be further from the truth. Failure isn't final. It's the fertilizer for your future success. The only thing that is final is quitting."

Some of the people we consider successful experienced failure. See if you can guess the names of these successful failures. He was fired from a newspaper for "lacking imagination" and "having no original ideas." Walt Disney.

She was demoted from her job as a news anchor because the producer said she "wasn't fit for television." Oprah Winfrey.

As a 30-year old, he was devastated and depressed after being removed from a company he started: Steve Jobs.

He failed the sixth grade and was defeated in every election for public office until he became England's Prime Minister: Winston Churchill.

He was fired after his first performance at the Grand Ole Opry and was told by the manager, "You ain't going nowhere, son. You outta go back to driving a truck." Elvis Presley.

She was a single mother, depressed and living on welfare, struggling to attend school when she wrote her first novel: J.K. Rowling.

Emperor Ferdinand criticized him and said his operas were far too noisy and contained far too many notes: Wolfgang Mozart.

In 2006 Michael Jordan made a television commercial for Nike in which he said: "I've missed over 9,000 shots. I lost almost 300 games. Twenty six times I've been trusted to take the game winning shot and missed. I failed over and over and over again in my life. And that is why I succeed."

Paul spent much of his ministry in prison, yet he refused to be called a failure. In fact, he boasted that being in jail just gave him a great opportunity to share the gospel. He wrote these words

from prison: "Now I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel. As a result, it has become clear throughout the whole palace guard and to everyone else that I am in chains for Christ." (Philippians 1:12-13)

Paul was the original optimist. He turned his lemons into lemonade. He turned a jail house into a church house. He turned those in chains into a congregation. He turned a prison into a pulpit.

One of my heroes, Charles Colson, died one year ago. He was an Ivy-league trained lawyer and a former Marine captain. He was a bloodthirsty political fighter. He once said he would walk over his own grandmother to re-elect Richard Nixon.

The turning point in his life was when he was convicted in the Watergate scandal and was sent to federal prison. Just before he was sentenced to prison, a friend gave him a copy of *Mere Christianity* by C. S. Lewis. Colson was at such a low point in his life he realized how much he needed Jesus. That's when he became a follower of Jesus Christ.

When he was released from prison he founded Prison Fellowship and was the author of 30 Christian Books and had a syndicated radio program called Break Point that aired on 1,400 stations. He received the Templeton Prize for religious work. President George W. Bush awarded him the Presidential Citizens Award.

His failure became the fertilizer for his success. In his book, *Born Again* he wrote, "The real legacy of my life was my biggest failure—that I was an ex-convict. My greatest humiliation—being sent to prison—was the beginning of God's greatest use of my life."

Hayes Wicker, his pastor at First Baptist Church, Naples, Florida, told me many of the 30-somethings in his church were surprised to learn Chuck was an ex-con. They just knew him as a great Christian leader. That's because God can turn human failure into heavenly favor.

3. THE FORMULA FOR FAILURE IS TO TRY TO PLEASE EVERYONE

There were many people who opposed Paul. But he wasn't a victim of the disease to please people. He wrote, "We are not trying to please men but God."

Herbert B. Swope was the first winner of the Pulitzer Prize for reporting. He later served as Editor of the *New York World*. His most famous quote is: "I cannot give you the formula for success, but I can give you the formula for failure: which is: Try to please everybody."

If you spend your life trying to please people, you will never succeed. Abraham Lincoln is credited with saying: "You can fool some of the people all of the time; and all of the people some of the time. But you cannot fool all of the people all of the time." But I don't think you can even please some of the people any of the time. And you can't even please all of the people some of the time. People are too fickle.

In his letter to the Galatians Paul wrote, "Am I now trying to win the approval of men, or of God? Or am I trying to please men? If I were still trying to please men, I would not be a servant

of Christ." (Galatians 1:10) We are often faced with the choice between trying to please people or trying to please God. If you please God it doesn't matter whom you displease. But if you displease God, it doesn't matter whom you please.

There is a fable about an old man, his young grandson, and a donkey. They were entering a city and the boy was riding the donkey as the old man walked alongside. They passed a group of people who remarked that it was terrible for the young boy to ride while the old man had to walk. So they listened to the critics and changed places. They went a little farther, and another group said, "What a shame to make a little boy like that walk!" So they listened to their critics and both rode. The next group commented on how cruel they were to put such a burden on the poor donkey. The old man and the boy decided they were right, so they decided to carry the donkey. As they were crossing a bridge, they lost their grip and the donkey fell into the river and drowned. The point of the story is that if you listen to every critic, you'll lose your...assurance of success.

4. GOD USES OUR FAILURES TO TEST US

Paul understood that temporary failure was a test. He wrote, "...God, who tests our hearts."

Life is full of tests. Since we were in grammar school, we've been taking tests. You can't graduate unless you pass the tests. And if you get caught cheating on a test, that's bad.

A high school teacher told the football coach she had caught his star quarterback cheating on a test, and he couldn't play on Friday night. The coach was upset and went to the teacher and said, "How do you know my quarterback cheated?" The teacher said, "He was sitting across from the smartest girl in the class and they had the same score." The coach said, "That doesn't prove anything, that could have been a coincidence." The teacher showed the coach the two tests and she said, "Here on question number 10 the smart girl's answer was 'I don't know.' And your quarterback wrote, 'I don't know either.'" Football players aren't the brightest bulbs in the knife drawer.

We talk about final exams, but there's a misnomer. Life continues to be a series of tests, even when you graduate. There are eye tests and stress tests; blood tests and taste tests.

God says, "See, I have refined you, though not as silver; I have tested you in the furnace of affliction." (Isaiah 48:10)

There are many places in the scripture where God speaks of refining us. A refinery is a place where a substance is purified. In an oil refinery, gases and other elements are removed from crude oil to create pure gas and gasoline products.

That's why God allows adversity to come in to our lives. He wants to purify our lives. In the furnace of affliction, God is removing those things in our lives that are not Christ-like. Several years ago, *Christianity Today*, conducted a survey of Christians. They asked the subjects to name the time in their life when they grew the most spiritually. Want to guess what the number one answer was? During a crisis. People confessed that their faith grew the most during times of personal adversity.

Here at Green Acres, we're interested in helping you grow spiritually, so I've been talking to Tim Roberts about how we can create more crises in your lives. Like that guy in the insurance commercial, if we create chaos and mayhem in your life, you'll be on a fast track to spiritual growth. Of course, I'm kidding. Our strategy is to get all of you involved in a Sunday Morning Bible Study group; doesn't that sound better than chaos?

We don't have to create crises. They are going to come on their own. And remember that during these times of adversity, God is testing us. He is purifying us in the furnace of affliction. It's hot in a furnace. And sometimes when the heat is turned up high, we want to say, "Okay, God that's hot enough. Have I passed the test yet?" When a silversmith refines silver, he heats the impure ore up to over 1800 degrees. As the ore melts, he skims off the impurities from the top of the silver. The only way the silversmith knows when the silver is pure is when it becomes like a mirror and he can clearly see a reflection of his face in the molten silver.

There's a great lesson there. When God has the heat turned up in our lives. He's watching us. Do you know when He knows we've been purified? It's when He can see the reflection of His Son Jesus in our character. And when God sees that in us, so do others.

CONCLUSION

God turns can turn man's failures into His favor. With the opening of the George W. Bush Presidential Library this past week, the spotlight shifted back to President Bush for a day. The majority of Americans considered President Bush to be a failure, but I believe he was a great President. He wasn't the most eloquent public speaker, but he acted on the courage of his convictions. I don't mind myself being the minority, because my beliefs are becoming less and less popular in America.

In 1937, George Gallup introduced a poll called the presidential job approval rating. The public was asked a simple question. "Do you approve or disapprove of the way President blank is handling his job as President?"

Here's some Presidential trivia for you. Did you know that President George W. Bush had the highest one-time approval rating of any President? 90% after 9/11. But he also had the highest one-time disapproval rating, 71% in October of 2008.

And when you look at the average approval rating over their entire term, George W. Bush has a higher approval average than President Obama. (49.9% to 49%) It just goes to show how fickle people are.

But since this poll began, can you guess which President has the lowest average approval rating? Harry Truman. His average approval rating was 45.4%. Ten days after being sworn in as Vice President, Franklin Delano Roosevelt died, and Truman found himself as the Commander of Chief of the United States. His average approval rating was 45.4%. He made tough decisions. He ordered the dropping of the atomic bombs on Japan to end WWII. He later fired General MacArthur during the Korean War.

But one of his most unpopular decisions was made on May 14, 1948. At midnight, Israel time, which was 6:00 p.m. in Washington D.C., the British formally ended their control of the area called Palestine. At the same moment, the state of Israel declared their statehood. President Truman and his cabinet knew this was coming and had argued about it for several days. The majority of his cabinet, including Secretary of State, General George Marshall, was violently opposed to recognizing Israel.

Nevertheless at 6:11 p.m. EDT, eleven minutes after midnight in Tel Aviv, Charlie Ross, President Truman's press secretary issued this statement: "The President has been informed that a Jewish state has been proclaimed in Palestine. The United States recognizes the provisional government as the de facto authority of the new State of Israel."

The first nation to recognize Israel was the U.S. And against advice from most of his cabinet, Harry Truman recognized them when Israel was only eleven minutes old. Chaos ensued after his announcement. Three members of his cabinet threatened to resign; they later stayed, but always disagreed with Truman's decision. Congress was upset that they weren't consulted about the decision.

And one day later, on May 15, the Arab armies attacked Israel and the first Arab-Israeli war began. But at least Israel had an ally on board.

Harry Truman has the reputation of being the most unpopular President. Many would call him a failure. But he didn't care about popular opinion. He wasn't afraid to fail. He said, "The buck stops here." When asked about his unpopular decisions, I love the way Harry Truman responded: "How far would Moses have gone if he had taken a poll in Egypt? What would Jesus Christ have preached if He had taken a poll in Israel? What would have happened to the Reformation if Martin Luther had taken a poll? It isn't polls or public opinion of the moment that counts. It's about right and wrong and leadership."

We've all failed, but remember that failure isn't fatal. It's just the fertilizer for success. Are you trying to please people or are you trying to please God?

According to the world's standard, Paul was a failure. He was unpopular. There was usually a mob after him. He spent more time in jail than he did in hotels. He was shipwrecked, beaten, and stoned. According to Ignatius, when Nero was Emperor, Paul was locked in the Mamartine prison in Rome. He was taken from the prison and beheaded, which was a benefit afforded him as a Roman citizen. Beheading was quick death, unlike crucifixion. The moment his head was severed from his body, he was absent from the body and present with the Lord. A failure? Think again. Today we name our sons Paul and our dogs Nero. Why? Because God can turn human failure into heavenly favor.

OUTLINE

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For the Joy...
Pastor David Dykes