

INTRODUCTION

In the movie, Apollo 13, the astronauts have experienced an explosion on the Apollo spacecraft and not only have had to abandon hopes of landing on the moon but are now trying not to abandon hope of returning to the earth! Ed Harris, the actor who played Gene Krantz, the NASA Flight director is shown in the movie at a critical point to exclaim, “Failure is not an option!” The phrase has become iconic in American culture since.

As much as we would like to be able to live up to that dictum, that “Failure is not an option,” our lives often seem to be just the opposite: Not only is failure an option, it seems to be the norm.

In our passage today we are going to see the disciples in action. There are three different stories that may seem unrelated, until you realize that the chapter is not only about Jesus and his teachings, but also about the disciples in their struggles and failings.

I will read the passage, look at the disciples and their struggle to place their faith in Christ.

READING

**Matthew 17:14–27 (ESV)**

**14** And when they came to the crowd, a man came up to him and, kneeling before him,

**15** said, “Lord, have mercy on my son, for he has seizures and he suffers terribly. For often he falls into the fire, and often into the water.

**16** And I brought him to your disciples, and they could not heal him.”

**17** And Jesus answered, "O faithless and twisted generation, how long am I to be with you? How long am I to bear with you? Bring him here to me."

**18** And Jesus rebuked the demon, and it came out of him, and the boy was healed instantly.

**19** Then the disciples came to Jesus privately and said, "Why could we not cast it out?"

**20** He said to them, "Because of your little faith. For truly, I say to you, if you have faith like a grain of mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it will move, and nothing will be impossible for you."

**22** As they were gathering in Galilee, Jesus said to them, "The Son of Man is about to be delivered into the hands of men,

**23** and they will kill him, and he will be raised on the third day." And they were greatly distressed.

**24** When they came to Capernaum, the collectors of the two-drachma tax went up to Peter and said, "Does your teacher not pay the tax?"

**25** He said, "Yes." And when he came into the house, Jesus spoke to him first, saying, "What do you think, Simon? From whom do kings of the earth take toll or tax? From their sons or from others?"

**26** And when he said, "From others," Jesus said to him, "Then the sons are free.

**27** However, not to give offense to them, go to the sea and cast a hook and take the first fish that comes up, and when you open its mouth you will find a shekel. Take that and give it to them for me and for yourself."

PASSAGE SUMMARY

We learn some important things about Jesus and also about how to live in the Kingdom. We also see that the disciples are struggling to put their faith properly in Christ.

OUR CONDITION

**To live in the Kingdom successfully, we need to put our focus on Christ and the gospel and not ourselves.**

God shows us our weaknesses to teach us to trust not in ourselves and to turn our eyes onto Jesus. Failure is not only an option; it is the inevitable path that we will go through to learn to live in humble dependence on God.

A main problem is that we are easily deceived, and our attention always somehow twists back to be on ourselves. It is as if we are a “black hole” with nearly infinite gravity; our own gravity pulls even the light that we have back to ourselves.

We need to focus on Jesus and spend less time on our inadequacies. All of us have different struggles and weaknesses and infirmities. Yet a common solution will be to learn to focus on Christ and the gospel to take the “twists” out of our lives.

THE 1<sup>ST</sup> FAILURE – FOCUS ON GOD NOT ON YOURSELF

In the passage before this Jesus had taken three disciples with him up the mountain: Peter, James and John. He was transfigured in front of the three disciples and was joined by Moses and Elijah who were the only two other people in history to see the glory of God in a physical manifestation. They were able to see who Jesus was, really was. It says that his face was as bright as the sun and his clothing was brilliant.

Moses had seen the glory of the Lord before. After God gave the people the Ten Commandments in the desert, God told Moses to come up the mountain with him so that he could give the rest of the Law as it is written in Exodus and Leviticus and Numbers and Deuteronomy.

Moses came down after 40 days, but the Bible says that the people were faithless; they had given up on Moses and felt that he and God had abandoned them and so they took matters into their hands, always a bad thing according to the Bible, and decided to fashion a God that they could worship. This was the best worship service ever, by man's standards, there was food and partying, and things we can't talk about in church - all in the name of "Worship."

Moses came down and was horrified and super angry. He smashed the tablets, indicating that these people were not worthy to be in any sort of covenant with God!

Even at the end of his life, when Moses wrote his farewell to the people of Israel, the sting had not worn off. He did not start on high note saying, "Hey people, it's been great!" but he wrote these words in

**Deuteronomy 32:4–6 (ESV)**

**4** "The Rock, his work is perfect, for all his ways are justice. A God of faithfulness and without iniquity, just and upright is he.

**5** They have dealt corruptly with him; they are no longer his children because they are blemished; they are a crooked and twisted generation.

**6** Do you thus repay the LORD, you foolish and senseless people? Is not he your father, who created you, who made you and established you?

Similarly, Jesus came down from the mountain, after his glory was revealed to find unfaithfulness occurring again; this time among his own disciples. Moses' words in the passage we just read, are what Jesus quoted when he said, (verse 17)

*17 "O faithless and twisted generation, how long am I to be with you? How long am I to bear with you? Bring him here to me."*

To the disciples, they would have been familiar words and they stung because they knew what they were about, and who they were spoken of – they did not want to hear them and be associated with those faithless people; yet they were.

Sometimes when we read the Bible, we can feel like God is speaking too harshly. But in my experience, when the Holy Spirit speaks to **me**, he does not speak in muted tones. He does not say, "Oh poor Dave, I know that you are weak and just human, so we will let this go." No, he speaks, plainly and clearly so that I know that I have sinned against an infinite and Holy God. He doesn't say, that's just a little sin, but rather, "What sort of person are you to put such a little thing above the Holy God!"

But then he invites me, like David in the Psalms, to return to him.

**Psalm 32:5 (ESV)**

**5** I acknowledged my sin to you, and I did not cover my iniquity; I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the LORD," and you forgave the iniquity of my sin.

And at that point the inexplicable compassion and mercy of God is poured out on **me**, a sinner.

**1 John 1:9–10 (ESV)**

**9** If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. **10** If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.

When we see Jesus speaking harshly to people, like the Pharisees or Sadducees or scribes, it is because their hearts are hard. Jesus never speaks more harshly than the hardness of the heart dictates. You don't break into a coconut without a hard tool. So, with you, you coconut heads, just realize that God is having to get through something hard, to get to you.

The inquiring minds of the disciples want to know what went wrong and Jesus says simply in verse 20,

*“He said to them, **“Because of your little faith.** For truly, I say to you, if you have faith like a grain of mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, ‘Move from here to there,’ and it will move, and nothing will be impossible for you.”*”

Jesus told them if you had even a grain of faith like a mustard seed, you would be able to move a mountain. By the way, to them, “moving a mountain,” was a commonly understood metaphor “for doing great things” just like we understand it, not physically moving a mountain.

They had no faith. They had faith in themselves. Maybe a bold disciple said, “Hey let me take this,” thinking that in and of himself, by following the words and formula of Jesus, he could do what Jesus did and also get the accolades. They obviously tried and failed to heal the boy, so they had faith in themselves, or an incantation, but they had no real faith in God.

And Jesus shows that **there is a moral failure** in that lack of faith. He says, “how long am I to be with you? How long am I to bear with you?” Well just a bit longer, until he bore all of our sins on the cross!

So many times, in the desert, the Israelites failed to believe and trust in God, despite the many miracles that he performed. God viewed it as a moral failure on their part, not to have faith.

Jesus and Moses called them a faithless and twisted generation. Before the fall, our brains and hearts used to work correctly. Now, we are brain damaged and heart damaged. Instead of going straight to God in faith, our faith somehow twists back to ourselves, as if we are the main thing.

In an episode of the Andy Griffith show, Andy's son, named Opie, goes to a county fair, and wants to try out the shooting gallery. He uses his money that he has saved for his dad's birthday present, because he is sure he can make more. He takes aim carefully and shoots! He misses! He tries again and misses again. He is perplexed and disappointed, he tries again and misses again. The problem is that the game is rigged and sights on the gun have been bent; no matter how he tries, he misses. He also comes back again later to try again, only to become even more frustrated. It is not until later in the show, that his dad, Sheriff Taylor, gets wise to the trickery and confronts the crooked gamblers. In our case, we have to learn to be suspicious of ourselves, that there is some defect, when our aim is constantly off.

I'll give you another illustration from C.S. Lewis, I'll just paraphrase what he was talking about. He said if you ask 20 good people what the greatest virtue is, they will invariably say, "selflessness." He goes on to say, "You see what has happened?" Instead of saying "love", they say "selflessness," as if having to forgo something was the main point, rather than the needs of the other person and loving them. So, a "twist" has happened, a negative term, "selflessness" is substituted with a positive term, "love."

This is an example of how our minds always take something straight, like love and twist it around to ourselves. We are crooked, perverted, and

twisted and somehow always find ourselves in the middle of everything. This is what the Bible calls sin. It is a disease and more deadly than any other because it robs us of a relationship with God and seeing God by faith; we see only ourselves and are alone. This is what I believe was happening with the disciples. They could not heal the little boy because they were focused on themselves and not on God. That is failure #1.

#### THE 2<sup>ND</sup> FAILURE – FOCUS ON OURSELVES INSTEAD OF THE GOSPEL

Let's look at failure #2. It was sometime later that verse 22 picks up,

*22 As they were gathering in Galilee, Jesus said to them, "The Son of Man is about to be delivered into the hands of men, 23 and they will kill him, and he will be raised on the third day." And they were greatly distressed.*

You may not see the failure but it is there. It says they were greatly distressed. Jesus was telling them about God's will. That he would suffer and die AND be raised again. It is as if they would not even hear that good part, because they did not want to understand the "bad" part.

The disciples could have been thinking, "Jesus, we don't want you to suffer!" But Jesus has already made it clear what was in God's mind; that such thinking was a hindrance to him, and that he was determined to suffer so that you and I would not suffer eternal separation from God!

The disciples may have not even have heard or understood what Jesus said about "being raised." My wife can tell you how prone I am to selective hearing. She says something in the first part of her story, and in defense of husbands everywhere, I like other husbands, want to actually think about that first thing with all of my available mental resources, then she says another thing, and another thing, and the mental queue is full! So maybe, when they heard of Jesus' death and suffering, their minds became

consumed with those thoughts that they could not even hear more about the resurrection!

Maybe they even thought that being “raised” meant that Jesus would go up to heaven after three days and his absence from them was all that mattered. In any case, they could not yet see the fullness of God’s plan, but they were “greatly distressed.”

How often do we do that in our lives? We get greatly distressed because we think we know what God’s plan is; that we will suffer loss in some way, but the reality is, that it will be a gain. It is true that Jesus was going to go away, but when he left, he left having accomplished the work God had for him; that he would die for the sins of the world. This is something that the disciples were not even thinking about, though it says it in Isaiah 53.

**Isaiah 53:4–6 (ESV)**

**4** Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted.

**5** But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed.

**6** All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.

What they expected was the victorious Messiah and King of Glory, but they did not realize that the suffering Messiah must come first.

When Jesus left, he left them with an accomplished gospel and the Holy Spirit that would inhabit every believer. This allows God to be closer to every believer than Jesus ever could in the flesh.

**The failure of the disciples was not to see God's big plan, which is the gospel.** The gospel is the important thing. It became the entire point of their lives, and the gospel is the point of your life too. You are here to make the gospel clear in your world.

**To solve failure #2, we need to focus on the big picture of the gospel, not on ourselves.**

THE 3<sup>RD</sup> FAILURE – DO WHAT GOD WANTS FIRST

Let's look at the third failure. This is Peter, who is often made an example of, but we are going to look to see how Peter learned the lessons too. Look at verse 24,

*24 When they came to Capernaum, the collectors of the two-drachma tax went up to Peter and said, "Does your teacher not pay the tax?" 25 He said, "Yes." And when he came into the house, Jesus spoke to him first...*

Meaning, in other words, that Jesus knew what Peter had said and wanted to have some words with him... and Peter probably had this sinking feeling that he had done something wrong...

Ok. I could not resist, I had to make a meme out of this...

**Show Slide #2**

It's like, "When you do something and your mom or dad says, "Hey come here..."

**Show slide #3**

Or "When you do something, and you get to be in the Bible..."

Jesus knew what Peter had said and spoke to Peter. Peter knew that a story was coming; Jesus told him that the Son of God is actually exempt from

that Jewish temple tax and that Peter was also since he was a son of the King and also a priest in the Kingdom.

The tax is referenced in Exodus 30 and it said that every person, 20 years old and above is subject to it, but only once in their lifetime, not annually as was now the case according to those in control. Once a government takes a tax or makes a new law, it never seems to go away.

But Peter had been rash as usual, “Speak first, think later.” Jesus in the end agreed that they should pay the tax, but not without establishing the principle.

**Peter’s failure is that he did not ask Jesus what he wanted first.**

He had to learn that God has a will and that it is not just to blindly follow a principle or “cave in” to those in authority.

In the end, Jesus did something to solve the problem. He did another miracle that demonstrated his lordship over the animal kingdom, by having Peter go fishing to retrieve the coin. Jesus has demonstrated that he can feed 5000 from a few loaves of bread and he can get money from a fish’s mouth! **When you think you are in a jam to do God’s will, you are not!**

#### CONCLUSION

We have seen three different failures in the lives of the disciples and of Peter. The great thing to see in scripture is that even though Peter is shown as an example of various mistakes and failures, he is also shown as an example learning the lessons and succeeding.

**To live in the Kingdom successfully, we need to put our focus on Christ and the gospel and not ourselves.**

Let's look at what the failures teach us, in reverse order starting from Peter's failure of not thinking through something to understand the principle of a matter before acting on it.

### **The 3<sup>rd</sup> failure – Do what God wants first.**

Peter, after the resurrection, now understood the purpose of Jesus's death and his role in proclaiming it. He preached to the people in Jerusalem to such an effect that the Sanhedrin, the Jewish Federal government, confronted him and told him to stop. Jesus had taught that we need to be subject to those in authority, like paying the temple tax, though it was not required, so Peter would have paused to consider their authority.

But Peter knew the bigger principle, that he must please God first and do what he wants, no matter the consequence to himself. **He showed his conviction to know God's will first.** In Acts 5:27 we read,

27 And when they had brought them, they set them before the council. And the high priest questioned them,

28 saying, "We strictly charged you not to teach in this name, yet here you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching, and you intend to bring this man's blood upon us."

29 But Peter and the apostles answered, "**We must obey God rather than men.**"

**Peter succeeded! He learned to put God first and not just bend to the will of others. That is the answer to failure #3.**

### **The 2<sup>nd</sup> failure is Focusing on ourselves instead of the gospel.**

Peter and the other disciples understood the gospel and ordered their lives around it.

God used Peter to preach to gentiles in Cornelius the Roman centurion's home. He showed Peter that the Gospel was for all people, not just Jews, and Peter responded and preached to them and the Holy Spirit was given to them when they believed, and it was a sign to everyone.

God used Peter at the Jerusalem council to stand up for the truth of the Gospel over those that wanted to impose Jewish laws on Gentile believers. The truth of the Gospel and the freedom of the believers was at stake and Peter helped them come to the right decision.

**Peter learned to put God first and to bring the principles of the gospel in focus.**

Your life is for the purpose of bringing the gospel into focus by seeing the big picture. We spend time thinking about our careers in life. We also need to spend at least an equal amount of time and effort in our career in the gospel. We spend time studying, preparing, getting internships, in order to have a good career, we also should be doing that for the gospel. Ask yourself, how can I be living and preparing myself to live out the gospel in my world?

When we put the gospel first, though we don't know what God is doing, we make the most of opportunities. The best one I know that does this was former Pastor Bill. If he is going through some trial, he is always talking about it to someone to make Christ known.

**Solution 2 is to put the gospel first and not focus on ourselves.**

**As we continue our count-down, we saw that the first failure was focusing on themselves and not on God.**

We have seen how our focus constantly seems to "twist" back on ourselves. We have a "bent sight" on our gun. Many of the trials and problems in our

lives show us that we are sinful beyond repair. Our old nature cannot be reformed. It cannot be repaired. We need to learn to be suspicious of ourselves and turn our attention to God as the only solution.

We are so twisted that we think that feeling bad about ourselves is what we should do. God does not want you to feel bad about yourself – I mean your sinful nature. If you do, it does not mean that you are more spiritual; like I used to think. That is another deception. It means that you are still focused on yourself! See how twisted we are?

We need to ask God for forgiveness. Thank him for it. Walk in joy in the Spirit that we are leaving the old self behind. There is no reforming the old self. There is no making it better. It has to be abandoned and we will learn that lesson 10,000 times as a Christian.

Paul says it like this,

**Galatians 2:20–21 (ESV)**

**20** I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.

**21** I do not nullify the grace of God, for if righteousness were through the law, then Christ died for no purpose.

In the Apollo 13 movie, the astronauts needed to do a burn in order to correct their trajectory back to the earth. The problem was that they could not use their navigation system due to it being off to conserve energy. They needed something in space to point at, and they used the edge of the earth as their focal point. As the ship darted all around they had to get that one thing back in the window before they completed the burn. They needed to get the earth, stable and centered in the window.

Similarly, we need to get Christ in our target sight. Without that we will tumble through our lives.

Christmas is a beautiful time for us to turn our focus from ourselves to the wonderful things that God has done to save us, hard-headed, twisted sinners.

I am grateful for the word of God. He comforts us by showing us the struggles and failings of others. And he shows us how to respond, not in another twist back to ourselves, but in looking straight to him as the proper response.

Please pray with me.