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WITH KEITH WALL

Why Failure *is* Never Final

Turn Setbacks into Steps Forward



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INTRODUCTION

Failure Is Not Your Enemy

Failure: It's a topic we're all too familiar with. From the moment we receive our first report card in elementary school, we begin our long, arduous indoctrination into one of the foundational beliefs of Western civilization: Failure is bad—*very* bad.

As children, we learn to fear its many forms—failure to master long division, failure to hit the ball at recess, failure to be the cool one at a school dance, ad infinitum. And kids who get X's in all the wrong columns often wear those marks everywhere, like a permanent tattoo of shame.

In a society like ours, geared to divide the world neatly into winners and losers, failure is unacceptable ... not an option ... a dead end.

As we get older, the stakes grow steadily larger until the consequences of our failures include unfortunate events like unemployment, addiction, bankruptcy, divorce, run-ins with the law, and the seemingly fatal wounding of our sense of self-worth. Over time, we might begin to believe that we *are* failures instead of holding to the realistic perspective that we have only failed at *something in particular*. What a heavy load to drag around!

If all of this sounds depressingly familiar, and you feel like your clothes have suddenly turned to lead, then this is your lucky day. Why? Because you are about to hear some good news for a change. *It doesn't have to be this way. Ever.* The oppressive philosophy that treats failure as cause for shame and self-loathing is, quite frankly, a bunch of baloney.

It is true that failure hurts. It is never anyone's first choice, and it certainly is never pleasant. Failure can make a royal mess of things and overturn all your assumptions about how your life was supposed to turn out. But it is emphatically *not* true that to fail at something—anything—makes you a “failure” or marks the end of your chances of ever succeeding again.

The truth is, if you are alive and willing to venture anything at all, you are going to fail. The question is, How will you think of your failures—and what will you do with them? Will you lie buried under the

wreckage for the rest of your life? Or will you light a fire, grab a hammer, and forge something new out of the ruins? Will you see your defeats as mortal blows, or as opportunities to learn and grow stronger?

The idea that failure is actually a priceless gift in disguise is nothing new. Joseph Campbell, author of the classic work *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, studied the world's ancient stories and discovered that the hero's journey always includes some kind of crushing defeat—even to the point of death. The purpose is to bring the hero face-to-face with their deepest fears. Only then can he or she rise above them, transformed and ready for the next chapter.

The conclusion Campbell drew for us in modern times is simple and succinct: “Where you stumble, there lies your treasure.”¹ Authentic treasure is found, it seems, in the very places and circumstances we have been taught to shun.

Carl Jung, the father of analytic psychology, came to the same conclusion. American poet

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Robert Bly wrote, “It is said that whenever a friend reported enthusiastically, ‘I have just been promoted!’ Jung would say, ‘I’m very sorry to hear that; but if we

all stick together, I think we will get through it.’ If a friend arrived depressed and ashamed, saying, ‘I’ve just been fired,’ Jung would say, ‘Let’s open a bottle of wine; this is wonderful news; something good will happen now.’”²

**A PAINFUL FALL
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If you’re willing to do the hard work of excavation and reclamation after an avalanche of failure, “something good” can most certainly happen. The treasure waiting in the rubble may take the form of new insight into what’s truly important to you, or renewed courage to take fresh risks in pursuit of your dreams.

A painful fall from one stage of life is often precisely the jolt we need to be prepared for something better. Sometimes powerful coincidences rise from the ashes, opening opportunities that could not have existed before the crisis. In all cases we have the potential to emerge as stronger, wiser, and better people for having spent some time in the fire.

Failure can work you over—or work its magic upon you. It's up to you which. If you choose the latter, begin by refusing to see failure as your enemy any longer.

As founder of the mental health clinic The Center: A Place of Hope, I have witnessed countless individuals show up at our doorstep feeling like they have failed miserably, letting down themselves and the people they love. Their failures involve addiction, marital infidelity, financial ruin, legal troubles, or any number of problems caused by poor choices or unfortunate circumstances.

The message my team and I consistently instill in our clients is the same one I want to send to you: Amid your failures, you can always, always, *always* find healing and restoration. You can be refined—not defined—by your failures. You can even become wiser and grow deeper because of your failures.



If you're wondering how such a good outcome could even be possible, stay tuned to learn what God, the one who created you and loves you, has to say about failure. After all, his standards are what define true success and true failure. In the end, his solution for our failures brings lasting redemption.

In the pages ahead, let's walk together on the path toward putting our failures in proper perspective—and growing in God's grace because of them.

“GROW IN THE GRACE AND KNOWLEDGE OF OUR LORD AND SAVIOR
JESUS CHRIST. TO HIM BE GLORY BOTH NOW AND FOREVER! AMEN.”

—2 Peter 3:18



CHAPTER 1

Your View of Failure *and* Why It Matters

The seventeen-year-old aspiring illustrator and cartoonist tried his best.

In 1919 he applied for a job as an office boy at the *Kansas City Star*, a well-respected Midwestern newspaper where Ernest Hemingway had worked as a reporter the year before, but he was rejected for being too old.

Next he was hired as an apprentice at a commercial art shop, but the young illustrator was soon let go after the Christmas rush and found temporary work through the end of the year. Out of a job, he and a partner started their own design business, which led to full-time employment at yet another company, where the pair created animated ads for movie theaters.

Eventually the young man started his own animation company that would go bankrupt within two years.

**FAILING IN LIFE
ISN'T A QUESTION
OF *IF* BUT *WHEN*.**



From there, he decided to move to Hollywood to become a live-action film director.³ Throughout his long career, his loan and financing requests would be turned down more than three hundred times.⁴

The man's name was Walter Elias Disney, but his friends just called him Walt. Despite his early career failures, and being cheated by unscrupulous business partners,

Walt and his brother, Roy, kept working and dreaming. It paid off, of course, and Walt Disney Studios was born.

| To Be Human Is to Fail

Failure is an ugly word we'd rather not think about too much. But failing in life isn't a question of *if* but *when*. It could be failing to make the varsity basketball team, like NBA great Michael Jordan, who ended up excelling on the junior varsity team as a sophomore.

Or perhaps, like science fiction legend Isaac Asimov, it's failing to get into your dream school. After being rejected by medical schools, Asimov was also rejected

by Columbia University when he first applied to their graduate chemistry program.

Or even worse, maybe your marriage ended in divorce, you became addicted to drugs or alcohol, you've served jail time, or your business went bankrupt.

The hard truth is that to be human is to fail.

For Walt Disney, failure came in the form of business setbacks and delayed dreams. And we've all heard stories about other famous people who had inauspicious beginnings. Some well-known examples include ...

- **Abraham Lincoln.** Young Abe failed dramatically at many things early in life, including a business partnership that left him deeply in debt, and he lost more than five elections for political office. He even suffered a nervous breakdown after the death of a friend.⁵
- **J. K. Rowling.** Shortly before writing the first book in the Harry Potter series, the now-famous author lost her marriage, became jobless and nearly homeless, and lived off welfare in order to care for her five-month-old daughter.⁶
- **Steve Jobs.** One of the most prolific innovators of our time, Jobs, a college dropout, cofounded Apple Computers but was later fired. Years later, he was

reinstated as CEO, leading the launch of products such as the iPod, MacBook, iPad, and iPhone.⁷

- **Theodor Seuss Geisel.** Now known to the world simply as Dr. Seuss (and one of the most beloved children’s authors of all time), he was voted “Least Likely to Succeed” by his classmates at Dartmouth College in the 1920s.⁸
- **Vincent Van Gogh.** Saddest of all on this list is Van Gogh, one of the most acclaimed painters of the Post-Impressionist period. After finishing one of his most revered works, *The Starry Night*, he told fellow painter Émile Bernard, “Once again I allowed myself to be led astray into reaching for stars that are too big—another failure—and I have had my fill of that.”⁹ One year later Van Gogh committed suicide, unaware of how highly the world would eventually value his talents.

Indeed, history has been kind to Van Gogh, but unfortunately, due to a mood disorder, low self-esteem, and persistent financial troubles, Van Gogh never took a high view of himself. In contrast, Abraham Lincoln, who suffered his own major setbacks and struggles, became one of the greatest leaders in US history.

PUT FAILURE IN PERSPECTIVE

Everyone on earth would prefer to succeed rather than fail—100 percent of the time. But because we are imperfect human beings living in an imperfect world, failure is inevitable. And it happens far more often than we would like.

Some people view failure as it should be: a temporary setback, a lesson learned, a growth opportunity. But for most, failure is viewed more harshly—as a roadblock to future progress, a reason to give up, and evidence they are defective at their core.

A good definition of failure is “when you attempt something and the desired result is less than what you expected.” The danger arises when you conclude that you yourself are a “failure”—someone who has a character defect, a lack of talent, or a personality flaw.

Instead, seek to gain a life-affirming attitude toward failure. Rather than viewing it as a catastrophic event, allow it to be a constructive experience ... an ally, not an adversary ... an open door, not an immovable barrier ... a fresh beginning, not a final ending.

| Defining What Success Means *to You*

Clearly, Lincoln and Van Gogh perceived and handled failure and success in very different ways. But what

**MAKE NO MISTAKE:
IT IS NEVER TOO
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SUCCESS.**



about you—how do you personally define failure, and how do you define success? These questions are important, because carving out your own definitions will help to guide and direct your life.

Some define success by how many zeros are included in their bank account balance, and some by friendships gained and moments shared with loved ones.

For others, success is based on what people think of them—extrinsic factors such as social media likes, accolades received, or promotions won. In contrast, some define success intrinsically by whether they've achieved a level of joy and peace in their life.

Identifying your own distinct definition is essential, and the earlier in life you can get a handle on it, the more time you will have to achieve it. But make no mistake: It is never too late in life to redefine your meaning of success.

So how do you set out to determine the attributes that will add up to a life of success? Start by asking yourself the following three questions.

1. WHAT DRIVES ME?

First, think about what drives you. Again, is it wealth, fame, prestige, or other outward factors? Or is it intrinsic qualities, such as enjoying harmonious, lasting relationships and having inner peace that is derived from your spiritual belief system? It's safe to say that for most of us, success includes both. But at some point, outward attributes will fail you if you do not also have an intrinsic basis for success.

For example, consider the opening scene of *Citizen Kane*, widely regarded as one of the greatest films ever made. We see the extremely wealthy Charles Foster Kane lying



on his deathbed—old, alone, and miserable. Suddenly he whispers a mysterious name: Rosebud. A childhood sweetheart? A deceased spouse? No (and here's a spoiler alert if you have not seen the film), Rosebud is

the name of his childhood sled. It's an heirloom that represents the happiest time of his life, when wealth and success were based on intrinsic elements such as comfort, joy, and contentment.

When a person's definition of success is based on external factors, there's a good chance he or she will miss out on fulfillment, happiness, contentment, and peace—elements of true success that our Creator intends for us to enjoy.

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