

The story of Peter's failure and the way Jesus pulls his life forward has to be one of my favourite passages of the Bible. Today's message is how you can **fall forward through failure**. Preachers over the years have treated John 21 in different ways – here are some of the ways it has been preached.

**The 3ms:** The miracle, the meal, and the message. **Messages on Restoration:** from a backslidden condition (going back fishing). **Messages about Commissioning:** Feed my lambs. **Messages of Empowerment:** This defeated coward overnight becomes a man of faith and courage! But you know the more I read it, the more I felt drawn to the fact that this story is a **Message of Recovery and Growth**. Something had to happen to Peter for him to become the rock upon which Jesus would build his church.

We connect strongly with this story because we too know what it is like to fail and when we do, how we respond to the failures in our life will determine how God is able to shape us. Peter needed to change from the raw - 'I am the man!' - I can do this stuff! I deserve a special prominent place sitting; I am the Lord's anointed! Let's stay up in the clouds of glory hilltop and who cares about the people down the hill! Later in his life, it was rumoured that he would be crucified upside down.

What happened to the Peter, who was all bravado and bluster? He failed publically and significantly, so much so that he would declare himself unfit for any role, let alone a leadership position. But in a mysterious way, he 're-qualified' his life through his greatest failure. He fell forward. There are countless stories of many Christians who fail and who then stay in failure mode, never get out and grow through it, get caught in a hiatus of shame, pity, self-justification, putting a spin on their stories. It was someone else's fault, the churches fault, the leadership's fault, and they continue to disqualify themselves from the very grace of God that desperately wants to lift them up and help them rise above it. They have fallen back or fallen out, instead of forward. Hurt or bruised, they lick their wounds in a narcissistic 'me -ism' and live in a messed up wasteland.

Some of what I am sharing today comes from a superb book entitled '**Leading with a Limp**' by **Dan Allender** whom I had the privilege to spend an evening with a couple of years ago.... **"The leaders God uses are more broken than strong, more damaged than whole, more troubled than secure, but their authenticity in flawed leadership compels others to follow them"**. And some of what I share today comes from my own story; a story that includes a time when I have run and hid with shame only to find the arms of God waiting for me. We can fail in all kinds of ways; in business, in career, in marriage, in relationships, in parenting, in managing finance and in being the person that we know we should be. Maybe we fail in being able to pass on faith to our families, or not 'being there' for someone who needed us. In fact, if you have never failed, it's likely you have never lived!

This morning, I want to share with you FIVE things about falling forward through failure.

**1. We can fall forwards when we are broken by shame and humiliation.**

We've all heard the expression that when you break a bone it heals stronger. Well, in fact, that's only a partially true statement. Your bone is never completely healed or broken – it is more like not healed or quite healed! There are three phases to the healing process: The reactive phase (during which the area around the break swells), the reparative phase (during which new cartilage cells bridge the gap or crack and turn themselves into bone) and the remodeling phase (where this temporary bone grows

to become permanent). This last phase can take between 3 weeks and 5 years! This bone healing process from our bodies is a great illustration of how God can also heal us from some of life's emotional pain and failures. But like any broken bones, they rarely happen in private. People know your stuff. There is something about people knowing which humbles us and makes us want to run and hide.

Sadly, many people find the church is the last place they want to be around when they fail. We desperately need more stories of restorative grace. Yes, our strengths may help us succeed in life in many areas, but it is our weaknesses and frailties which show God's work in us best. So a good question for any incoming pastor or leader might be – tell me about your losses, your betrayals and even your failures and what you did in the months following those painful events? We put too much spin on life's events to dress them up; to make us look better or less at fault. I was talking to one of my colleagues about a very painful period in his life which resulted in his abrupt termination from one of our churches. He said, "I am going to start a church where I can never be hurt again, never voted out of office, where protections are put in place so I can never be harmed"! He is still causing grief because he has not learned the secret of failing and falling forward. Peter's denial was before a slave girl, but his restoration was public. Something needs to be broken inside us and failure does that. So don't hide from the humbling that takes place; it's part of the process God uses to shape you. And friends, sometimes healing, like your broken bone, can take years!

**2. We can fall forwards when we relearn something we thought we knew.** That we are not as strong, nor as courageous, as we think we are. Through our failures, God's grace and power is displayed in our lives.

It's no secret that the greatest men and woman of faith listed in Hebrews 11 were all failures – each with their own speciality of frailty. They joined the band of 'limpers' whose stories included murder, adultery, rage, cowardice, manipulation, greed and all kinds of self-seeking. These are the ones God chose to be leaders of the people of God. They don't score highly on the 'I've never been in trouble before in my life' scale and they also don't score well on the 'I've got a clean closet.' It's almost like God seems to choose the raw people with character flaws and then remake them. Everyone has a history, but it's a history where they have learned the secret of falling forwards through their frailties; where they proved the grace of God was capable of lifting them up. Jesus did not ask Peter: Do you want to lead the church? Do you want to preach? Do you want a position of leadership? He said, "do you love me?" Three times!!! Come on Peter, which way are you going to fall? Fall back in self-pity or fall forwards? Yes, Lord, you know everything. You know I love you, you just want me to say it and own it. Dan Allender says "God calls us to brokenness, not performance, to relationships, not commotion, to grace not success." We learn this not in the classroom but in life's schoolroom. Peter would come to say, "I learned that I am not strong nor courageous. In fact, what mattered most was in the heart of me. That was what I needed to learn.

**3. We fall forwards when we experience grace as well as believe it.** There has been a huge swing in the last 100 years from cognition (knowledge – the theology of God from reformation era) to experience! Today, people have a lot of feeling about their faith, but it needs to be balanced with cognition. Your theology about God is thrashed out, tested and matured by your experience of God and the journey of your life. *Faith is not just about what you know and believe; it is about what you experience of what you know and believe.*

You begin to prove what you believe not just in the highs of mountain tops but also the lows of loss, failure, despair, shame. Where is your God then when you lose your job, or lose a loved one, when illness strikes or you have failed dreams or relationships and you feel a profound sense of failure? If Peter was ever going to lead others to God, he first had to exchange his old life for a new one; his old ways of thinking for new ones. Grace in 'theology speak' isn't something that you just know about, it's something you experience. Forgiveness isn't something you just rationalise about like it was a credit card transaction, it's something your Spirit ingests. I remember my conversion, yes, and my baptism, but I can also still remember the day, when I was in a place years ago, where, by my choices, I had stepped outside God's boundaries and where Jesus came looking for me and said, "Lloyd do you love me?" He lifted me up. All my theology about God counted for little then. That day, I joined the great club of limpers, where I knew in my heart I was not strong; I was weak and my knowledge and experience about who God is became my story. Too many of us have beliefs in God that are not tested in the furnace of life experience.

**4. We fall forwards when we re-think our theology about what God values.** God prizes character over gifting and skills. Nothing tests the heart of who you really are like failure. It's what you do **next** that matters. For some time, we might go AWOL and do bouts of flight, but the heart will surrender and return. And when it comes back, it is not easily tempted again by power, pride and ambition because there's *nothing much left to lose when you have left it behind already*. You've fallen forward, and when you do that, you cannot carry anything with you. From that day, your walk is different. Something has changed; something deep inside you. Others notice there's been a shift inside you; that there's a kind of recklessness about life and what you counted as of value.

**GK Chesterton** wrote in his book entitled **Orthodoxy** "*They say in war.... A soldier surrounded by enemies, if he is to cut his way out, needs to combine a strong desire for living with a strange carelessness about dying. He must not merely cling to life, for then he will be a coward, and will not escape. He must not merely wait for death, for then he will be a suicide, and will not escape. He must seek his life in a spirit of furious indifference to it; he must desire life like water and yet drink death like wine.*" There's a reckless freedom that comes to someone who has failed and fallen forward.

Lastly, Peter comes through this looking sideways at his best friend John, and says to Jesus in verse 20, well what about him, what's his future?

**5. We fall forwards when we walk our own pathway and know the seasons of God.** We walk with a limp now on a pathway carrying the load God intended for us to bear to a destination he has chosen and we refuse to **compete** or **compare** our path with what God is asking of someone else. Peter learns to carry his own load and that there is no place for sideways glancing in the kingdom. It's not a race you need to win; you just have to finish.

Now many of you may be sitting today and saying to yourself, "this message doesn't affect me, I'm not a leader, not a preacher or even interested in leadership, that's not my gifting. This message is really good for others." Let me say to you; **no one is a mere follower**; if you follow Jesus, you are a leader. You need a backbone, not a wishbone; you are salt and light. You might think when I signed on to follow Jesus; I never signed on for this kind of scrutiny.

When you have fallen forwards through failure; you journey with a **newfound sense of frailty** on one side and **the grace of God** on the other. Now you know why Peter, who stood up on the day of

Pentecost, preached the way he did. There was a reckless abandon that GK Chesterton talked about because he had joined the band of God limpers. Our failures can make us stronger and I think Peter limped for the rest of his days. Not a physical limp; but a limp of someone who has allowed God into the **engine room and undergone reconstruction of spirit and growth of character.**

Today I'm not going to give an altar call; I am going to ask you to pray a prayer if in your heart you truly want to move past something that has hurt you, or hampered you. If you are aware this morning of some failure in your life that you need to bring to God; do it today! Grow through it and become the weaker and stronger person God wants you to be. Here is a prayer that you can pray:

***"I have decided my life will move forward from failure, obstacles and excuses with a newly discovered knowledge of my frailty and weaknesses and I will face the future with a reckless abandonment and embrace new pathways of grace and Spirit-filled living... limping as I go."***

**Another of the great limpers in the Bible was Paul, the global missionary and writer of scripture.**

**2 Corinthians 12: 9-10** He said he would glory in his weakness so that the power of God might be demonstrated through his life. He didn't mind limping because it reminded him who he belonged to and where he came from.

**1 Corinthians 1.27-29** "God has chosen the foolish things of the world to shame the wise, God chose the weak things of this world to shame the strong.... So that no one could boast before him...."