

The sermon

Intro

This morning's passage is one of my favorites in Scripture. Because of two remarkable truths. Recovery from failure. And the strength Jesus gives to his weak people.

Think for a moment about failure.

What would you say your greatest failure in life was? Think back about an event you deeply regret. Maybe a decision. Maybe some words you said. Maybe some words you left unsaid. Maybe a duty you failed to carry out.

How do you live with that failure today? What was the outcome?

Think for a moment about your own weakness.

Where do you find yourself paralyzed by fear? Where do you find yourself controlled by the opinions of others? Where do you find yourself discouraged and defeated? Where do you find yourself overwhelmed by life's demands?

How are you dealing with your weakness? Where are you turning for help?

This morning's passage shows us failure need not be the final word. And there's sufficient strength out there if you look in the right place.

READ PASSAGE

Body

Point 1: Radical restoration (4:9-15)

Do your best to come to me soon. – 4:9

Paul wants Timothy to visit him in Rome before Paul's executed.

When you come, bring the cloak that I left with Carpus at Troas, also the books, and above all the parchments. – 4:13

Paul left behind a number of items at Troas. Some conclude these items were left behind because Paul was captured and imprisoned without warning. "*the cloak*" = heavy outer garment for Paul's cold prison cell. The **books** and **parchments** included things like Old Testament Scriptures, copies of Paul's letters, personal documents, writing projects, blank sheets for future writing.

For Demas, in love with this present world, has deserted me and gone to Thessalonica. – 4:10

Demas was Paul's co-worker (Philemon 24). He was with Paul during Paul's 1st Roman imprisonment (Col 4:14).

There's speculation about Demas because details are lacking. Some believe Demas abandoned the faith and lost his salvation. Others understand Demas' departure to be a fleeing to save his own life rather than a departure from the faith.

"*world*" isn't the Greek word for the evil world system. It means "era, age." Given that eternal life can't be lost (John 10:27-29) and every person who experiences justification will experience glorification without fail (Rom 8:30), and assuming that one of Paul's longtime co-workers was a saved person, it appears a desire to save his own skin caused Demas to depart for ministry elsewhere.

These words say nothing about the eternal fate of Demas.

Paul notes who's with him and who's gone where (4:10-12).

In the early Christian movement where there was cooperation between co-laborers rather than competition.

Alexander the coppersmith did me great harm; the Lord will repay him according to his deeds. – 4:14

We're not told what Alexander did. We're not told where Alexander did it. Some conclude that Alexander got Paul arrested in Troas.

Paul's confident God will repay Alexander's sin. When we're sinned against, this is the right attitude. God will repay. I don't have to. Even if the authorities don't act. Even if my parents don't act. Even if the church doesn't act.

Beware of him yourself, for he strongly opposed our message. – 4:15

Alexander is a dangerous individual. Some gospel opponents should be corrected gently because, perhaps, God will grant them repentance (2 Tim 2:24-26). Others should be avoided altogether (2 Tim 3:5). The missionary in dangerous locations must make judgment calls. Is this person open to the gospel? Is this person seeking to find evidence to turn me in?

Mark (4:11)

Get Mark and bring him with you, for he is very useful to me for ministry.

Let me tell you what preceded this request.

Something happened during Paul's 1st missionary journey.

Now Paul and his companions set sail from Paphos and came to Perga in Pamphylia. And John left them and returned to Jerusalem, – **Acts 13:13**

Paul and his companions, Barnabas included, were on a mission trip to make converts and establish churches. During their travels, a man named John left the group for Jerusalem. This occurred approximately 46 AD.

Is this the same as Demas leaving for Thessalonica?

Later this created a sharp rift between Paul and Barnabas.

And after some days Paul said to Barnabas, "Let us return and visit the brothers in every city where we proclaimed the word of the Lord, and see how they are." ³⁷ Now Barnabas wanted to take with them John called Mark. ³⁸ But Paul thought best not to take with them one who had withdrawn from them in Pamphylia and had not gone with them to the work. ³⁹ And there arose a sharp disagreement, so that they separated from each other. Barnabas took Mark with him and sailed away to Cyprus, ⁴⁰ but Paul chose Silas and departed, having been commended by the brothers to the grace of the Lord. – **Acts 15:36-40**

John is also called Mark. As Paul was about to set out on his 2nd missionary journey with Barnabas, "there arose a sharp disagreement." Paul didn't want the deserter Mark to accompany them. Barnabas did. As a result, Paul and Barnabas separated. This occurred approximately 49 AD.

Note Paul's concern over Mark was so great he was willing to separate from Barnabas.

Some years later Paul's tune had changed. Approximately 13 years later, in 62 AD, Paul wrote this:

Aristarchus my fellow prisoner greets you, and Mark the cousin of Barnabas (concerning whom you have received instructions- if he comes to you, welcome him), ¹¹ and Jesus who is called Justus. These are the only men of the circumcision among my fellow workers for the kingdom of God, and they have been a comfort to me. – **Colossians 4:10-11**

We discover Mark was Jewish and Barnabas' cousin. Does this partially explain Barnabas' decision?

We also learn that Mark was now a comfort to Paul and Mark was giving churches instructions.

At the same time, Philemon was written and Paul said this:

Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, sends greetings to you, ²⁴ and so do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke, my fellow workers. – **Philemon 1:23-24**

Mark, along with Demas, was Paul's fellow worker. Mark had gone from unworthy to travel with Paul to a fellow worker who comforted Paul. This same Mark was the writer of *The Gospel According to Mark*. Mark went from unworthy to be a traveling companion to writer of Scripture!

At the time 2 Timothy was written (approx. 65-67 AD), Paul wants Timothy to bring Mark because **"he is very useful to me for ministry"** = useful in church work and personal encouragement to Paul.

What does this mean for us?

Failure doesn't have to define us. We can recover. We can make corrections. We can become useful.

What was Mark's failure? He deserted the team. He quit. What was Mark guilty of? Failure to keep his commitment. Poor decision-making. Maybe cowardice?

What was the result? Paul didn't trust him. So Paul wouldn't travel with him. Mark's decision harmed his own reputation, divided friends (Paul and Barnabas), and disrupted gospel advance. The damage was done, but it didn't mean Mark was ruined for life. Recovery was possible.

The pastor who commits adultery may never pastor again because of a permanently damaged reputation in the town, but he can repent and minister to hurting people.

The person who made an awful decision to quit a good job can make better decisions in the future and work hard where they're at.

The toxic church member whose passion for their own preferences divided a church can repent and become a useful church member.

Relationships can be restored. We can move from unreliable to trustworthy.

Mark's failure wasn't the last word. Paul didn't write off Mark. Somewhere along the line Paul moved from suspicious to trusting. Somewhere along the line Mark regained Paul's trust.

That's what God does. He opens our eyes to see our failure and shows us a better way. Here's how it can work. God sends a trial. We fold under the pressure. We learn we're not as strong as we thought we were. Recognizing our lack, we own our failure and seek God's help. Seeking God's help we find ourselves altered by God. Character that wasn't present has now emerged. Failure = opportunity to grow! We failed because we lacked something. Because we failed and turned to God, we find ourselves having the character we previously lacked! Sometimes failure's inevitable because the character isn't there yet!

You made a bad decision 30 years ago. You made a bad decision five years ago. There's consequences but you can recover. You can move from quitter to trusted and useful.

Practical question: where is my failure an opportunity to experience spiritual growth?

Point 2: Christ's strengthening power (4:16-22)

In 4:19-20, Paul relays greetings and locations.

Again, we have cooperation between a number of workers and churches in multiple locations, not competition.

Do your best to come before winter.

Timothy needs to rush because sea lanes were closed from November to early March because of dangerous weather.

At my first defense no one came to stand by me, but all deserted me. May it not be charged against them! – 4:16

“*first defense*” = initial hearing before he was imprisoned. Paul was imprisoned. It didn't go well.

Paul was deserted by believers and all alone. Paul isn't holding grudges.

But the Lord stood by me and strengthened me, so that through me the message might be fully proclaimed and all the Gentiles might hear it. So I was rescued from the lion's mouth. – 4:17

Weak Paul was strengthened by the Lord = Jesus. No earthly support, no fellowship, but Jesus was present. Paul wasn't alone!

“*so that*” = purpose. Jesus strengthened Paul so that those present at the hearing would hear the gospel proclaimed. They heard it all: God the Creator, sin, the cross, the resurrection final judgment.

“*rescued from the lion's mouth*” = not put to death at that time.

The Lord will rescue me from every evil deed and bring me safely into his heavenly kingdom. To him be the glory forever and ever. Amen. – 4:18

While Paul expects to be executed rather soon, he's convinced death isn't the last word. Jesus will, in the future, rescue the executed Paul by re-uniting his separated soul and body into a glorified body fit for the kingdom of God. There Paul will dwell in the presence of God in a renewed earth free from the conditions of the fall. Paul possesses certainty!

Divine strengthening

Here I want to share what 4:17 does for me.

The word translated “*strengthened*” = make able, empower, make strong.

The word's used in **Ephesians 6:10**:

Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might.

We're all commanded to be strong in Christ. Meaning access the strength that's found in Jesus. Us weak people assaulted by Satan's schemes can find the necessary strength in the person of Jesus.

The word's used in **Philippians 4:13**.

I can do all things through him who strengthens me.

The context of this claim was the ability to have contentment in hardest of times: humiliation, hunger, and need. When things are at their very worst, Jesus' strength is sufficient to sustain our weary souls!

The word's used in **2 Timothy 2:1**.

You then, my child, be strengthened by the grace that is in Christ Jesus,

Timothy's fearful of suffering like imprisonment (1:7-8; 2:3). So Paul commands Timothy to access the strength that's found in Jesus. When fears and anxieties are ruling our minds, Jesus' strength is sufficient to provide the necessary courage to carry on.

Personal

Let me tell you what these verses do for me when I get afraid or feel overwhelmed. Yes, I do get afraid and I do get overwhelmed.

When I'm afraid that if I speak the gospel someone's going to get upset or laugh at me, I can speak the gospel with clarity and confidence.

When there's a hard conversation I have to have and I'm afraid I'm going to be rejected, I can have that conversation.

When my hot button's been pushed, I don't have to explode in anger. I can be calm.

When my schedule is too busy and I long to rest, I can rejoice in the Lord and take things one moment at a time.

When I have an "unjust" equipment failure, I can give thanks and submit to God's will.

When I have a crushing, unexpected expense, I can have peace and confidence in God's provision.

It doesn't have to be "big" things. It can be "common" things.

I can pray out loud in the presence of other Christians. I can give a good account of myself in a job interview. I can pass my driver's test. I can love that hateful co-worker. I can keep my mouth shut or not post on social media when my response isn't going to please God.

Some of you are facing weakness I'm not experiencing. You need to say, I can endure this horrific pain with thanksgiving. I can endure this waiting for a diagnosis with joy. Yes, it's not natural. It's supernatural.

The problem is, left to ourselves, we can't. I'm weak. I'm fearful. I'm angry. I'm discouraged. So I need Jesus' help. The answer is always prayer. Begging Jesus to supply the strength that I lack.

The answer is never self-confidence. That's a sandy foundation. Self-sufficiency is a spiritual plague! Placing our confidence in ourselves, we fail to turn to the one who has infinite strength to sustain us. The answer's confidence in Jesus. A solid rock to stand on. In the end, I'm not able. But Jesus is! Christian, humility is your friend!

In whatever situation I find myself, in whatever circumstance God has wisely guided into my life, I can find strength to honor God. If I seek Jesus.

So Christian, have confidence in Jesus. You can endure joyfully. You can have peace. You can be thankful. You can give praise. You can honor God in that hard spot. If you seek the strength that's found in Jesus.

A word of caution. This isn't one and done. Since each day brings its own trouble (Matt 6:34), we need to seek Jesus' strength daily.

Practical question: in what areas of life am I turning to Jesus for strength?

Conclusion

Maybe you wouldn't consider yourself a Christian and you're considering Christianity?

This morning Paul reveals two things about us. First, we're flawed. We act cowardly. We renege on our commitments. We sin. Second, because of our weakness, we need outside help.

Paul proclaimed a message of rescue through a person: Jesus Christ.

On the cross, because of his love, Jesus gave his life as a ransom for many. To rescue all those who would ever believe from their sins. Rescue is judicial. If you believe, Jesus takes the punishment in your place. You're forgiven of your sins. You're rescued from the penalty of sin.

Rescue is internal. Jesus said, "*Whoever believes in me... Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.*" If you believe, Jesus rescues you from flawed thoughts, attitudes, desires by living inside you. He makes you new. Jesus rescues from the power of sin.

How can you be right with God? How can you experience forgiveness and Jesus' strength? Turn from your sins by trusting in Jesus' death and resurrection, not yourself.

Thank Jesus for dying on the cross. Confess your sins to God and ask for his forgiveness. Trust that you're forgiven because God receives all who come to him through Jesus.

Christian, learn from your failure. Christian, turn to Jesus for strength in your weakness.